
Postcolonial Identity and Cultural Displacement in Meena**Alexander's *Manhattan Music***

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Abstract

This study tries to assess the complex interconnections of diaspora, hyphenated subjectivity, and cartographic disruptions in Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997). In this paper, I suggest that Alexander renders cultural displacement not just as a geographical passage, but as a continuous somatic and psychological crisis by outlining Sandhya Rosenblum's psychological journey as a fracture in late 1900s New York. It takes place as it explores both local experiences of contemporary urban alienation and systemic transnational traumas through the events of the Gulf War, the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 in Delhi, and the communitarian violence in Hyderabad. This analysis draws upon paradigms that postulate by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, thereby illustrating the disengagement of assimilationist narratives in migrants. Rather, it suggests a disjointed life in which the familiar contours of the homeland keep on clashing with an unfamiliar, unstable host landscape, made up of many ethnic groups. In addition, the paper outlines how Sandhya's psychological paralysis differs from confrontational, syncretic performance art, as exemplified in the work of Draupadi Dinkins. Dinkins uses the 'Third Space' diaspora to break down essentialised categories of race, nation and gender. In the end, all that is shown here is the fact that Alexander thinks of postcolonial identity as an ongoing process of cultural translation that is constructed from bits of sensory data, family structures, and ad hoc coping strategies.

Keywords: Diaspora, Somatic Cartography, Hybridity, Cultural Translation, Meena Alexander, Trauma Studies, Hyphenated Subjectivity.

Introduction

Geographical exile and the rethought psychology of the subject of the subcontinent in the global metropolises have been the basic axis of current postcolonial critique. Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) is an intricate literary study of this existential dispersion, a charting of the inner spaces of characters displaced from their native ground and dropped into New York City's hypercharged world at the dawn of the 1990s. Alexander doesn't suggest that transnational migration is characterized by a linear assimilation or economic upward mobility, but rather by overwhelming physical, emotional, and political tensions that accompany cross-border migration. The subjectivity of the novel is a battleground on which the traces of historical memory continually clash with the more pressing realities of the postmodern host culture. Alexander examines the boundaries of hyphenated identity through the main character of Sandhya Rosenblum, a "translated subject," in the words of Salman Rushdie: someone who belongs in more than one place, and who never feels like she really belongs anywhere. This article will explore how the images, sounds, tastes and textures of prose, the broken chronologies, and the trans-cultural networks in Alexander reveal the double consciousness of the postcolonial subject and the complicated forms of cultural displacement.

I.The Somatic Shock of Arrival and Liminal Citizenship

One of the main indices of displacement in *Manhattan Music* is the overwhelming feeling of physical and linguistic alienation that the immigrant feels as soon as he/she comes into the world of the global metropolis. To Sandhya, New York is not so much a liberating place as it is a disorienting one of endless multiples and destabilizing mimicry that threatens to efface his fragile selfhood (Alexander 13). This displacement can be seen as one that is directly mapped onto the body and Sandhya's experience of the city becomes a set of spatial negotiations and racialized categories. She navigates her way through the crowded cityscape and finds herself unable to decipher the social topography of the city, or to situate herself securely in its intricate layers. But then she marries an American Jewish man, which places her in a tradition of trauma that she cannot hold onto. Sandhya's feelings of erasure and non-identity become embodied when she takes a stroll close to Central Park, while reflecting on the artificial surfaces of her green card:

Running her fingers across the top of the card, she attempted to move through the flashing colors to what lay underneath, the dark face, smothered under the dark skin and floating hair of the image. But the woman's mouth in the green card was agape at the immigration officer who, in something dark, was so brisk, so glad--Welcome to America--Be happy here. (Alexander 7)

This passage shows the separation between official documentation and the inner life of the postcolonial subject. The green card, rather than assisting on the path towards citizenship, becomes an artificial line that keeps Sandhya stuck within a firm image. The plastic lamination is a metaphor for the institutionalization of the host state's bureaucratic elements that reduce the living subject to an institutional signifier, obscuring her physical reality in the background, to smooth out the historical specificity (Alexander 7). Private in her thoughts on changing her own physical appearance, Sandhya embodies her intense desperation for a solution to the everyday issues of being displaced: “she wonders if she could peel off her black skin, die her hair blonde, and then she wouldn't have to deal with the sharp friction of the displacement, because she would look and feel like they do” (Alexander 7). We can see her subjectivity being restricted to her defensive adaptation: she clutches her subway token just as other people do, in order not to be erased by the structures (Alexander 13). Identity is thus an act of performance in order to move through a space that wants her and yet cannot have her dark femaleness.

II. Traumatic Cartographies and the Haunting of Memory

In postcolonial literature, the historical memory is often unstable, tending either to retreats where there is felt to be less alienation, in the present, or to become oppressive forces that prevent access to the present. Alexander does not see memory as a collection of nostalgic longing, but as a flood that endangers to dissipate the immigrant's agency. The body is in Manhattan, whereas her consciousness still is rooted in the stones and landscape of Hyderabad (Alexander 15). Throughout the story, she alternates between her peaceful and orderly American life and her violent and brutal Indian past. In particular, Sandhya is haunted by an unspoken memory of death, that of a man's body discovered in a dried riverbed at a point when the communal rioting was not acknowledged (Alexander 17). This violent memory correlates her with the larger geopolitical traumas, anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, creating an inside geography where geographical distance is fully negated.

Alexander's narrative structure reflects this psychological break by episodic jumps and by various times that overlap. There is no respite from this alienation in the dreams Sandhya has: they constantly bring her back to a tenuous blaze of light before sunrise in another land (Alexander 9). The haunting memory of her youthful, radical first love, Gautam Reddy, whose life ended after being tortured to death in a police cell for joining an underground political party, haunts her in a vicious circle of remembrance (Alexander 21). Memory here is literally haunted physical memory. But her broken form and broken eyeglasses converge upon her in recurring nightmares, a stark contrast to her middle-class American life. Her cousin Jay's physical burden of this trauma is transported across

boundaries: an inch-long piece of glass taken from Gautam's spectacles wrapped in muslin with care (Alexander 65). This relic is a literal piece of a broken history; it burns a hole in his pocket while Sandhya tries to build a normal life in the New World (Alexander 63).

III. Building the Third Space: Performance Art and Syncretic Hybridity

Whereas Sandhya depicts a stasis provoked by cultural dislocation, in the novel, culturally dislocated characters create flexible, syncretic subjectivities through their own responses. Postcolonial translation takes place in an ambivalent *Third Space* of hybridity where dominant cultural codes can be recontextualized and subverted, as Homi Bhabha says. Draupadi Dinkins, an Indian, multi-ethnic performance artist, is the embodiment of the dynamic stance in *Manhattan Music*, as she is a descendant of Indian, African-American, European and Native American heritage (Alexander 47, 49). While for Sandhya her "mixed" identity is a precarious state, for Draupadi, it is a rich source that is very helpful for political art. Her work is an avant-garde installation and street theater that makes deliberate use of ancestral myths and the contemporary political struggle, having a direct confrontation with the history of racism and systemic exclusion.

Alexander says that Draupadi's "deliberate manipulation of cultural memory" (46) is evident in her confrontational and sometimes overly explicit performance pieces at Franklin Furnace that directly confront essentialized notions of race and nationality. Her fire-born heroine from the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata meets with an African-American surname, thereby defying hard and fast social barriers. Defending the generative power of artistic imagination, Draupadi responds to her cousin Jay's doubts about the historical legitimacy of her cross-cultural aesthetic, her relation to an ancient epic past.

"But is this your past?" he pressed her, irritated by what he thought of as her hallucinogenic vision of myth. "Is that Draupadi as close to you as Billie Holiday, for instance, whom you love so? Why not take your blood from there, redraw the map?" Draupadi disliked his arguments... "I feel I do have a bond with Billie Holiday." (Alexander 53)

This exchange forms the basic logic of syncretic transnationalism: the postcolonial past is not a monument to be preserved but rather a set of whispers, bits of music and snarky phrases to which the displaced person has a right to reassemble (Alexander 53). Alexander proposes, via Draupadi, that resilient diasporas involve negotiating with their roots in an active, flexible way. In the hybridity of the present, she puts displacement in historical perspective, which makes it a means of artistry and self-determination.

IV. The Erotics of Transnational Non-Belonging

Sandhya's extramarital affair with Rashid el Obeid, an Egyptian scholar based in Brooklyn (Alexander 55), is a reflection of the intersection of different types of postcolonial traumas. But while an uprooted academic, Rashid is also historically melancholy and restless in his movement between the liminal domains of the Western university and the metropolis. It's not as much an escape from domestic boredom as it is an erotics of non-belonging, a physical meeting of two different currents of cultural displacement. In an empty Brooklyn room, their bodies serve as vessels for the translation of Egypt and India's histories in the private space of the room. Rashid sees their mutual outcastism as a way of coming together; he envisions a panorama in which they can hold each other's weaknesses: he sends her off on the Nile; he travels on the Ganges (Alexander 76). But, with a regularity almost mocking the landscape of the syncretic fantasy, political realities intrude and the inability to flee from the past problematizes the picture. Rashid recognizes that history in the case of the uprooted subject needs to be made from the ruins:

“Sandhya,” he said, “we have to play the past with a rough instrument and people like us have to make up the past from little bits and pieces, play it. Imagine strings running through, playing it, halathi!” (Alexander 79)

This awareness opens a paradigm for comprehending the identity of this post-coloniality in Alexander's text. The past is essentially broken up – a resistant, historical wreck that has been channeled into space (Alexander 79). But it is the actual practice of playing this instrument – coercing a syncopated melody from the various cultural markers – that is the subject of displacement, who maintains agency. In the end their relationship falls apart due to the psychological disintegration of Sandhya. She tries to make their passing love permanent, asks him to live with her, to make a house, but Rashid withdraws, for he can't provide her with a permanent anchorage (Alexander 155). He likens them to Frankenstein's monster: they're made of bits of other people's spiritual flesh; they need someone else to insert the current of life into them (Alexander 155). Realizing this, Sandhya becomes lonely, as no romantic union can fill in the cracks of cultural displacement.

The Tattooed Soul – Culinary Ritualism and the Inscription of the Animus/Animated Soul.

But when these influences of the large, fluid metropolis threaten him, the postcolonial immigrant will often turn to his domestic space and his sensory rituals in order to create a provisional order. The kitchen plays a vital role throughout *Manhattan Music*, where Sandhya tries to reshape the cultural syntax of her home country. Cooking Indian style with mustard seed, hot oil and turmeric and garam masala is a demanding act of cultural memory (Alexander 63). Her apartment is an attempt to bring the spatial reality of Kerala to

the temporal reality of her house through the smell of curry leaves, tamarind, and fresh coriander. The act of cooking is a way for her to be connected with her own mother, Sosa and grandmother Eliamma, half a world away (Alexander 61, 73). However, even these personal traditions are affected by the postmodern consumerism, since she cooks samosas from a commercial supermarket—a cold, artificial representation of her heritage (Alexander 71).

Sandhya gains a bitterly won insight by the end of her psychological journey into the fact that there is no way back from her displacement. Returning to India when her father is dying of cancer doesn't restore her to her childhood home, but only serves to remind her that it now exists in a place she can't recognize. On Manhattan, she undergoes a physical transformation: cutting her hair close to her body, wearing worn clothes, which is an outward sign of her rejection of traditional roles and essentialized identities (Alexander 186). She knows that her travelling between borders, her crossing of borders, has forever changed her inner cartography; that her soul is forever marked by her crossing of borders:

Here she was, the oldest granddaughter, in an apartment in a great metropolis, three continents away from the pattern of life. All of which she was able to find were fragments of space pieced together, bits of time, gathered like burning flesh. The borders she had crossed had marked her very soul. Now she was a tattooed thing, thought Sandhya Rosenblum. (Alexander 73)

With this metaphor, postcolonial identity is not one of tragic loss but of permanent inscription. The postcolonial subject is "tattooed" as it is structurally marked by multi-geographies, multiple languages and traumas from history (Alexander 73). Survival is achieved not by regression to a purity of origin, and not by wholesale giving in to assimilation, but by learning how to live in this branded, plural skin, to find a complex music in the permanent conditions of cultural displacement.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Manhattan Music* by Meena Alexander provides a broad and challenging examination of the transnational migration narrative, polyproblematizing the easy-version cultural assimilation settings. In this way, the novel suggests the constant psychic and physical tension in transnational displacement in contrast to Sandhya's immobilising presences of historical melancholia, while Draupadi's radical fluidity in the subversion of the postcolonial archive. Alexander clearly shows that the lost baseline of the homeland is not completely emptied, rather, it "survives as the complex somatic inscription upon the diasporic subject." Finally, the novel places postcolonial subjectivity not in a regressively nostalgic quest for a lost unmarked place of origin, but rather as a 'tattooed' state

of being. Thus, survival requires constant and strategic cultural translation, through which fragmented memories can constantly be negotiated in the global metropolis' unstable terrain.

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