
Diasporic Distresses and Female Expression in the poems of Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt

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Abstract

Present paper deals with Meena Alexander's River and Bridge and Sujata Bhatt's Brunizem. It attempts to show how the female poets have discovered their own voices and developed their sensibilities. Alexander and Bhatt both are diasporic poets. Indian Diasporic poetry addresses the issues of alienation, displacement and rootlessness and explores the problems of migration and diasporic life. Diaspora is a huge and vast concept in literature. Indian writers have immensely contributed to the growth of Diasporic poetry in English. Many Indian women poets write about their personal experiences, displaying feminine consciousness. The women poets of Indian diaspora have migrated to and settled in various countries like Denmark, Germany, Australia, England, and USA. Though they have settled abroad, they are connected to Indian soil and differ from Western behavioral patterns. Their poetry reflects the tensions caused by their Indian psyche in the alien situation. They express diasporic distress and female expression through their poetry. Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt successfully manage diasporic distress and try to assimilate into the new culture. They discovered that separation from mother tongue meaning loss of identity and feels alienated. Both the female poets talk about universal fear of poets: the fear of leaving "no word... "no following voices", and the fear of becoming a "nobody" is present in their poems. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the improved status of women in diasporic community. Diasporic women poets cannot compromise like an average woman with any imposed situation. Their poetry makes a transformation from traditionality to modernity. It is an expression of their changing attitude towards society.

Keywords: diaspora, displacement, poetry, alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, exile

Paper:

Present paper deals with selected poems of Meena Alexander's *River and Bridge* and Sujata Bhatt's *Brunizem*. *River and Bridge* and *Brunizem* are anthologies of poems. The paper attempts to show how the female poets have discovered their voices and developed their sensibilities. They show their grief, nostalgia, identity crisis, frustration and alienation through their poetry. Alexander and Bhatt are diasporic poets.

The term ‘diaspora,’ was originally used to describe those who are away from their homeland. In today’s world, the term is applied to cover all immigrants, refugees, and expatriates. The experiences of these immigrants are impacted by geographical dislocation and hyphenated identities, bilingualism, rootlessness, nostalgia and displacement. According to Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘diaspora, is “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions”. The word “Diaspora” originated from the Greek root and appears in the Old Testament where the people of Israel travelled from Egyptian servitude to their promised homeland. Medieval period remind of the history of the displaced people who migrated from their homeland and it began the Buddhist missionaries. The people of India displaced to Cyclone and South Asia as the labourers and craftsmen. Indian people were attracted by the Indian Ocean Trading System and migrated to East Coast of Africa. This system was stopped during Portuguese rule. A large number of Gujarati traders migrated to Kenya and South Africa under the British rule in the nineteenth century. Slavery was eradicated in the British Caribbean and the consequence was the shortage of labourers for plantation owners. As labour many people of India migrated from the plains of Tamil Nadu and the Gangetic Plain. They were exploited and worked on sugar, tea and rubber plantations and considered came to be pioneers of diaspora.

Diaspora means displacement; displacement can be physical or psychological. Physical displacement means people leave their native land and settle in other countries. On the other hand, psychological displacement means diversion of mind. In today’s globalized world travelling and adopting cultures have become major concerns. The migration of population at a particular point though not in the Jewish sense has formed Indian Diaspora. William Safran says: (1991)

Historically the term ‘diaspora’ referred mainly to the depression of Jews from their original homeland; it also referred to other two classical or traditional diasporas such as Armenians and Greeks (83).

In the globalized world people constantly travel to across borders for better education, future and job prospects. According to a broad survey, displacement in some cases is forced and in other cases is desired. Today large portion of Indian population is settled abroad. Immigrant people react differently to displacement. Some people feel comfortable in a foreign land but many people consider their native land as their true home, culture, tradition and family. They feel nostalgic and uneasy in the host country as they are unable to break their relation with their motherland. On the other hand, there are people who are happy to be away from depressing poverty and unfavorable conditions in their homeland; while some others keep oscillating between their loyalties to their homeland and adopted land, and can never fully settle down in one country.

In the present paper two diasporic writers and their selected poems are discussed. These poets focus on the problems of women immigrants in an alien country. Their autobiographical experiences are reflected in their poems. If it is talking about their poetry, the “story” of

Indian poetry began in 1830 with Kashiprasad Ghoshe, who ventured to publish a volume of English poems” (*Naik, Echo* 27). Kashiprasad Ghoshe called himself the first Hindu who published poems in English. Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) contributed generously Indian English poetry by women. Themes of their poetry are love, home, nature which form poeticized with narrative and descriptive skill. In the colonial period Sarojini Naidu (1879-1940) “Nightingale of India” got the prominent place among the Indian English women poets. As a woman Naidu concerned with women’s problems and their destiny. One of the famous poets was Rabindranath Tagore whose work *Gitanjali*, collection of poems translated from Bengali into English. He always gave the importance to women’s identity in his works and portrayed a “Strong Women” in his famous work *GhareBaire* (1916), but sometime in his prose writings women are to be shown to be submissive characters Tagore (1922) says:

Woman has to be ready to suffer. She cannot allow her emotions to be dulled or polluted, for these are to create her life’s atmosphere, apart from which her world would be dark and dead. (163)

The scenario changed with the rise of the next generation of poets who have shown a sharp sense of reality about themselves and their surroundings. Among them are Roshen Alkazi, Tapati Mookerji, Leela Dharmraj, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Sujata Mathai, Mamta Kalia, Suniti Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande, Kamala Das and others. The Contemporary women poets mark evolution of the Indian feminine psyche from tradition to modernity, by moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women. Indian English women poets have provided commendable benchmark to the Indian feminine psyche. When one person shift from one country to another and seeks his/her identity contemporary poets describe it as the “search for identity” and central theme of their verse. The Poetry of exile has acquired significant position in the Indian literature in English. Women poets of Indian Diaspora have migrated to and settled in various countries like Denmark, Germany, Australia, England, and USA. Their migration is self-exile and the reasons are greater opportunities outside India: marriage, job, education, and desire for adventure. Though they have settled abroad, they are connected to Indian soil and do not assimilate into Western behavioral patterns. Their poetry reflects tensions caused by their Indian psyche in an alien situation. They express diasporic distress and female expression through their poetry.

Meena Alexander was born on 17 February 1951. She spent her childhood in India and Sudan. She acquired a bachelor’s degree in French and English from Khartoum University. She got PhD in English from Nottingham University. She came back to India and worked in various universities. She taught in Delhi and Hyderabad Universities. She wrote three books of poetry: *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976), *I Root My Name* (1977), and *Without Place* (1978). Alexander is famous for her lyrical writing which related to the diaspora in its impact on the subjectivity of the writer and their past circumstances that caused them to cross the border. Some of her famous works are: *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004) and *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2015). She also revised a volume of poems for Everyman series entitled Indian love poems. She has also published essays and poems with the themes of nostalgia,

displacement and migration such as “The Shock of Arrival: Reflection on Postcolonial Experience (2006). Alexander’s autobiographical memoir, *Fault Lines* was revised in 2003. She has written two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997) and published two academic studies, *The Poetic Self* (1979) and *Women in Romanticism* (1989). *A fault line* was one of the bestseller books selected by the Publishers Weekly in 1993. *Illiterate Heart* got her PEN Open Book Award in 2002. One of her books, *Poetics of Dislocation*, was published by the University of Michigan. Her poetic collection *Illiterate Heart* (2002) is dedicated to the memory of father. It uses memory as a medium and metaphor for intimate exploration of connection with both India and America. In *Raw Silk* (2004) she has reflected on the theme of migration of aftermath and also portrays a variety of incidents in the U.S and in the world away from homeland. Alexander’s work is full of contemporary issues. Her experience of exile is converted into poetry, which describes her practical experiences like memories, and journey to different places in India, America and Sudan.

River and Bridge contains many poems that deal with the themes of migrants, displacement, exile and loss. The subtitle poem *Relocation* is reminiscent of a strong note of migrancy. The image of multiple travels and crossing icy borders held her mind in a statement of “metallic fork.” Problems of the containment of the Indian imagination in an alien landscape are described in the poem —*Relocation*. She says:

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.(3)

Alexander raises thematic and ideological issues about going back to Indian roots. The marginal self that intertwines both Indian and foreign locations, and the crucial stage of assimilation into American culture. Her poetry is deeply rooted in diasporic distresses and feminist consciousness.

In the poem *Estrangement Becomes the Mark of the Eagle*. She comments on estrangement that has come because of exile from homeland:

We lie in a white room, on a bed with many pillows
next to a window just above a street
You whisper: exile is hard
let me in to your mouth, let me blossom
I listen for I know the desert is all around
the muggers and looters, caravan men with masked faces. (45)

Exile has brought cultural alienation while living in a room with bed and many pillows next to a window near a street in New York. She feels that exile is tough, just like a desert everywhere full of muggers, looters, caravan men with masked faces. Exile is the most important aspect of nostalgia and a distressing banishment from one's homeland. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile*(1995) says: "Exile is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact"(3). In this situation, one cannot help but feel like an outsider. This is a paradoxical situation because the effect of exile is not on the writers work, but on the writers.

In the poem *Muse*, Alexander deeply shows her deep grief for the ruin of 'our language' and the sense of having 'no home'. She says:

Our language is in ruins
vowels impossibly sharp
broken consonants of bone
She has no home.(23)

Muse (2) is a poem in sequel to the former poem in which she had already discussed the predicament continues with the same thing. She says:

creatures of here and there
 we keep scurrying
Madurai, Manhattan, who cares?
When she turns it is etched on her:
Words, sentences, maps,
her skin burns bright;
Sheer aftermath.(24)

Alexander's diasporic consciousness longs to harmonize the past and the present and move towards progress. Her poetry is a 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* explain 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 poem:

I have come to the Hudson's edge to begin my life
 to be born again, to seep as water might
in a landscape of mist, burnished trees,
 a bridge the seizes crossing. ...
criss- cross red lights, metal implements,
battlefields: birth is always bloody.(12)

River and Bridge (1996) contains poems that express nostalgia for homeland, past memories of childhood and also show the life of a migrant in the USA. In the poem *Softly My Soul*, the poet describes the American life:

Softly my Soul, softly my soul o so softly

the herons have fled, but the planes keep coming.

Above Liberty's torch the sky is pink

And George Washington would laugh in his sleep

to mark the gazelles on Fifth Avenue

tiny miniskirts hoisted to their thighs(4)

Women diasporic poets face the burden of racialism and displacement in alien countries. They also suffer from ills of patriarchal society. Women diasporic poets face the double burden of racial as well as sexual. When Alexander was a teenager in Khartoum, she kept journals that contained quotes from Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, Wallace Stevens and her own poetry. Her mother forced on her that women should accept limitations imposed on them by their bodies and honour their femininity. Arranged marriage was a narrow bridge that all women had to cross and learn required skills to run a household. In Kozencheri, girls could not get out without proper escorts. They were often molested in market places of Kerala. Alexander had heard many stories that women committed suicide to do away with their shameful bodies. Such kind of incidents regarding women haunted her. In her poem *Passion*, she poignantly describes the life of a woman:

I am she

the women after giving birth

life

to give life

torn and hovering

as bloodied fluids

baste the weakened flesh.

For her there are no words

no bronze, no summoning.

I am she

smearred with ash

from the black God's altar

I am the sting of love

the blood hot flute

the face

carved in the window,

watching as the god set sail

across the waters

risen from the Cape,

Sri Krisna in a painted catamaran.....

And thrust her to the broken floor. (10)

Thus Alexander's diasporic consciousness recalls her old cultural identity through past memories, native language, myth, and her poetry expresses a new birth of identity from her value domain as diasporic daughter of India.

Sujata Bhatt was born on 6 May, 1956 in Ahmadabad, Gujarat and was brought up in Pune until 1968, when she migrated to United States with her family and continued her studies at University of Iowa. She is married to German writer Michael Augustine. During her early days she worked as writer in residence at the University of Victoria, Canada. *Brunizem* (1988), *Monkey Shadows* (1991), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Point No Point* (1997), *Augotra* (2000), *The Colour of Solitude* (2002), *Pure Lizard* (2008) and *Life of Jim* (2015) are her major works. *Brunizem* was her first collection of poems which won Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1988. The book also won Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize. She also got Cholmondeley Award and Tratti Poetry Prize award. She has been writing for the Indian tradition and its sensibility and relates with the new generation of the Indian English women poets. Moving between countries and cultures, Sujata Bhatt is concerned with the construction of the self and its relationship with memory, history and identity. Her poems *Brunizem* and *Monkey Shadows* are replete with the images of birds, insects, animals like peacock, lizard, crocodile; monkeys etc. It is considered to be a part of her thought rather than physical entities. She evokes the images of ancient mythological figures God and goddess like Lord Hanuman, Goddess Kalika, Nachiketa and others. Bhatt always identified with her native land and country through these images. She describes in her poem *Brunizem* about the childhood memories, birds, animals, sights sounds and smells of village life. These things relate her to her native land. She returned to her city Ahmadabad after ten years, and encountered the feelings of nostalgia and displacement. Her efforts for the diasporic literature are understandable, imbued with assimilation and reconciliation. Sujata Bhatt also considered as a Postcolonial Indian English poet. Her poetry is deeply colored by her quest for difficult truths of life and concerns questing for fluid identity. It deals with Indian, landscapes and moves towards Europe and America but India remains her main concern. She feels sometimes obsessed with transformation and growth of languages. She is shocked to learn how the language of colonizers loses its bitterness and endears itself to succeeding generations. Bhatt explains the colonial nature of languages in the poem *Brunizem*, subtitled *A Different History*:

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language
Truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with the long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face-
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.(37)

In these lines poet explains that oppressor's language gradually becomes the language of the oppressed. For the first time when English was introduced in Bengal, its effect was

revolutionary. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first social reformer study who took the comparative study of all religions in English considered the language of the colonizers.

Bhatt's *Search For My Tongue* was written after she listened to recordings sent by her mother from India to her in U.S.A. Bhatt expressed her grief and fears of losing her native language and identity. She became about how her new personality will fade in the U.S.A. and she says:

I ask you, what would you do
If you had two tongues in your mouth,
And lost the first one, the mother tongue,
And could not really know the other,
The foreign tongue. (65)

The poet suggests that no one can use both the languages together and if one has to use a foreign language all the time, one's mother tongue would rot and die in one's mouth. The poet says that she felt like spitting out her mother tongue completely. But at night, her mother tongue returns in her dreams. Her mother tongue blossoms and blooms like a flower on her tongue and ripens like a fruit in her mouth. Poet explains that mother tongue is very strong:

It grows back, a stump of a shoot
Grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,
It ties the other tongue in knots,
The bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,
It pushes the other tongue aside.
Every time I Think I've forgotten,
I Think I've lost the mother tongue
It blossoms out of my mouth. (65)

The poem was composed at a time when she was studying in America, where her native tongue (Gujarati) came to her dreams and English language is the language of everyday use so that confusion creates in her mind which language should be adopted. So this poem presents the finest example of the expression of diasporic sense of loss .It can be of language as also fluid identity of a female.

Like Kamala Das's poetry a large number of her poems talk about her childhood days in India. In her poems, Bhatt remembers her sweet old days spent in Poona. The school (St Helena founded in 1918), she recollects in to earnestness. Memories of her school days reveal her feminist longings:

The atmosphere there was quite oppressive and stifling. We were instructed to be meek and submissive and had to walk about with our heads bowed down to avoid being accused of pride or arrogance. In subjects such as History and English, we had to memorize many texts and we were told what to think about them. I remember feeling terribly disappointed that my own thoughts were not really welcome and all along one was made to feel that being a girl was a great misfortune.(Vicki Bertram Interview)

Such rhetorical questions recur in her works and they express the poet's genuine quest and concern for her identity in the making her poetical world is full of colours, sounds and fragrance. Her maiden volume *Brunizem* has almost half of the poems set in India where she recalls her family, childhood memories, sights, sounds and smells of village life. She returns to her city Ahmadabad after ten years and experiences mixed feelings of nostalgia and confusion. Her poems draw upon Indian myths, deities and especially animals. Bhatt's metaphors often give erotic plays to language though her preoccupation with language is also largely political. Her thoughts and ideas emanate from Indian culture. In her poem "A Different History", she delves deep into the Indian culture and expresses her attachment to the minutest details:

Here, the gods roam freely
disguised as snakes and monkeys;
every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book. (*Brunizem* 37)

Distance cannot separate her from her motherland. She displays openness to different cultural environments and their inherent possibilities. She thinks her exile in a way is a blessing in disguise. In an autobiographical essay, Bhatt says of exile, thereby commenting on her creative freedom and the notion of openness related to living in the world. She comments:

In a way, exile brought me closer to India. I could find about Indian History, mythology, art, sculpture, sociology etc. I missed the Gujarati language as well and started reading Gujarati books...I consider myself to be an Indian writer, but I like to think of myself as living in the world as opposed to in any one country. ("From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen", (qtd. in Sandten 89)

However, she seems to have solved the problem of displacement, as she explains in this essay, also feelings of nostalgia, uprootedness, diaspora, displacement, migration and exile are also prominent in her poetry, along with consciousness of the epistemological and cultural implications of a blended identity and its creative potential. The concept of identity is multifaceted in diasporic writing. The migrants negotiate between the old and the new identities. The negotiation of new identities has been explored vastly in the postcolonial diasporic literature. Sometimes the migrant sticks to his or her native identity through culture. The negotiation of identities results into evolution of hybrid identities. Homi K. Bhabha in the location of culture suggests re-evaluating the notion of identity. He says that the displacement of a person does not always have a negative impact. It can also be liberating and constructive. Bhabha argues that identities can be recreated by crossing borders into the in-between spaces:

The need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities
and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the
articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the
terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal that
initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and

contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.(2)

Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt successfully manage diasporic distress and attempt to assimilate into a new culture. In their poetry, we find sense of restlessness, loss resulting from displacement and uprooting from one's own home, country, culture, language and environment. They experience the pangs of displacement but do not exhibit them the way other diasporic poets do. They carry their "home" wherever they go. They discover that separation from mother tongue means loss of identity and feelings of alienation. Both the female poets discuss the universal fear of poets: the fear of leaving "no word", "no following voices, and the fear of becoming a "nobody". Women poets use different strategies for projecting these women. Journey has frequently been used as a metaphor in diasporic women poetry. Thus, journey of immigration turns into journey of settlement and journey of self. The women writers incorporate their personal experiences of diaspora to project a new empowering image of woman.

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