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**A Study of Female Characters in Diaspora Literature with Special
Reference to Select Works of Meena Alexander and Chitra Banerjee**

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Abstract:

Meena Alexander returned to India in the 1970s to teach at the university in Hyderabad. The author makes a reference to the origin of *Nampally Road* in her autobiography *Fault Lines*. As the title of the memoir indicates, her sense of displacement or dislocation is such a strong sentiment, owing perhaps to the physical path of her life that she appears to struggle with lines, boundaries and environments in her work and self. This universal sense of displacement is evidenced in *Nampally Road*, where much like the author, the main character Mira Kannadical returns with much optimism to make a new beginning in her homeland, extremely disaffected after her four-year study stint in England. Mira's return coincides with preparations for the festivities surrounding the 60th birthday celebrations of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. These celebrations emerge as the main event in the novel, causing the transmutation of the quiet Nampally Road into a noisy, crowded street. With a huge amount of state money being redirected towards these extravagant celebrations— indicating a displaced sense of governance and power, which the protagonist struggles to come to terms with, Mira says:

I returned to India determined to start afresh, make up a self that had some continuity with what I was. It was my fond hope that by writing a few poems, or a few prose pieces, I could start to stitch it all together: my birth in India a few years after national independence, my colonial education, my rebellion against the arranged marriage my mother had in mind for me, my years of research in England. (Alexander: 1991: 30)



The identity crisis, the need to belong, shattered by ground realities and turning into dismay and perplexity are corroborated by Alexander's own life in *Fault Lines*, where she talks about the proximity of her faculty office to the prison in Hyderabad. Here she was often forced to hear the cries of the prisoners when they were perhaps being tortured. She refers to the moans of the prisoners getting mixed with the sounds in the street—once again exemplifying the confusion of mixed identity—being unable to distinguish one from the other yet being conscious of both. When Alexander submits the poems containing elements of police abuse to a local paper to get them published, only blank empty spaces are printed thus highlighting government's censorship of content. (Alexander: 1991: 127)

Similarly, for Mira—all her hopes and dreams are shattered to see a totally different picture of India which teems with violence, civil unrest, and turbulence. The protagonist struggles to overcome her naive idealism and attempts to recognize and assimilate the changes in her country. Her misplaced recollections of a glorious past and her own confusion are described by Mira in the following words:

As for the Indian past, what was it to me? Sometimes I felt it was a motley collection of events that raised in my mind, rather like those bleached stones in the abandoned graveyard the boy picked his way through. I had no clear picture of what unified it all, what our history might mean. We were in it, all together, that's all I knew. And there was no way out. (Alexander: 1991: 28)

Starting with an account of her years in England and how Mira makes up her mind to return to teach in one of the universities in India, the novel goes on to document some selected socio-political events in Hyderabad that depicts the corrosion in the



personal and political areas of life and speaks of a wider dislocation of a nation struggling to define itself in the post-independence era. Witness to a brutal assault by the government's "Ever Ready" men on a group of poor orange sellers who are about to start a peaceful demonstration against the latest tax hike inflicted, Mira begins to question her own perceptions and writings in an environment where poverty and misery co-exist with a gaudy display of power and wealth. This serves to create an antipathy in Mira, who begins to question her own writing and her perspectives on life. She realizes much to her panic, that her world of writing was such where "words made no sense that could hold together. The lines sucked in chunks of the world, then collapsed in on themselves." An environment of "too much poverty and misery" leads her to reconcile to the fact that these chaotic circumstances do not "permit the kinds of writing" she had "once learned to value" (Alexander: 1991: 32). The protagonist finally comes to conclude "no one needed my writing. It could make no difference." (Alexander: 1991: 28).

Unlike the short novel *Nampally Road*, the postcolonial tale of *Manhattan Music* is set in New York of the troubled 1990s. It narrates the life and time of an immigrant, Sandhya Rosenblum who has married to an American Jewish man. Sandhya tries to make sense of her life which is haunted by memories of her father who died recently in her native India. All these are juxtaposed with the time of turbulence of 1990s that witnessed the braking out of Gulf War, Islamic fanaticism and the assination of Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. She is shown drifting apart from her Jewish-American husband and searching for solace with her Egyptian lover. On the other hand, an American born Draupadi Dinkins who has multicultural background in Indian, African, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and European predecessors. She is shown trying to get rid of her own demons by engrossing herself in the performing



art. In *Manhattan Music*, Meena's immigrant characters, like in most of her fictions, struggle to adapt to the American life and at the same time feel stretched within due to the obligation to be at two places at the same time. The narrative technique of *Manhattan Music* is occupied with frequent changes of time, place and focus. That resulted in the style that reinforces the themes of multiculturalism and disorientation at the same time. This fragmented style comes very close to that of Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness and co-creates a kaleidoscopic imagery. Nevertheless, it also creates distortions in the narrative flow and distracts the readers from the characters and the stream of events in the tale. Nonetheless, Meena seems to have succeeded in producing yet another novel with sophistication that reflects the mental states of the people who have immigrated to the land of opportunities but are coping with hyphenated identities, divided loyalties between their homeland and the new found land and their once long cherished but now fragmented dreams.

The novel *Sister of My Heart* portrays a world of women, this time of Indian bourgeois urban women who are confined to households in which their domain is strictly demarcated. However, it does not limit them from enabling themselves to reach out to each other in sisterhood. The story is rendered in an often carnal and poetic language, which predominantly weaves around the magnetic love that pulls these two cousin sisters. The art of storytelling is used for emotional soothing and memory-mending by the characters in the novel.

In Divakaruni's fiction sisterhood has always been a deeply rooted, intuitive relationship that binds the women who are very not like each other in any way. *Sister of My Heart* is one such peculiar instance. Very different in appearance, nature and accomplishments, the Chatterjee sisters, Anju and Sudha have grown up together under similar yet very different circumstances. The fathers of Anju and



Sudha were cousins themselves, died together in the same accident. However, Anju's father was the master of the house, and her mother was from an equally upper-class family. On the other hand Sudha's father was a poor relation and her mother's background was ordinary, lower middle-class. Sudha and her mother remain in the ancestral mansion only, not out of the sense of possession but because Indian family bonds would not have it otherwise.

Gouri Ma, or Rani Ma, Anju's mother, as her servants and many of lower-caste workers love to call her, remains the sole earning member of the family. Gouri Ma has a gracious and calculating personality of a landlady with her bunch of household keys tied to her cream-coloured silk saree, her pearl broach on the shoulder. However, as the feudal system ends, the Chatterjee's no longer remained the awe-inspiring, lavishly wealthy family they once used to be.

The Chatterjee sisters would do everything together and love each other vigorously. They prefer to be known not just as sisters but as twins as they were born on the same day. To them sisterhood is not just a matter of ties of kinship but of adoration. Anju once tells Sudha, "I would love you because you love me. I would love you because no-one else knows us like we know each other" (Divakaruni: 1999: 61). Once they grow up, they may get separated by fate and marriage, but they let nothing stand in the way of their love for each other, even jeopardizing the love of the men in their lives for each other. It is perhaps this that makes Divakaruni call *Sister* a novel of women's friendship, not of sisterly bonding.

The cousin sisters, Sudha and Anju, live in a patriarchal family in which there is absolutely no male control. The only man alive in the household is disguised as Singhji, the driver who exercises no authority over the family. What was originally



regarded of as a preventive periphery for the women is recreated into a female universe. The rules that are upheld in this world are laid down by the patriarchal society. It is only later that the world of the Chatterjee women is completely transformed into a modern.

Divakaruni exposes women freedom, humanity, and the right to life. She also judges the often superstitious, planet-gazing conservative Bengalis through the highly critical eyes of a postcolonial commentator who scrutinizes the far-reaching impact of British colonialism on the Bengali psyche. Thus, the Chatterjee cousin sisters attend the English-medium convent schools and look forward of enrolling at Lady Brabourne College's English honours program. Both of these institutions were the products of the British rule India. Further, the modern education trends can be seen in Anju's extreme fascination with Virginia Woolf, or her craze for Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Divakaruni gives us a rich image of the need of economic stability for liberating women through the character of Anju. On the other hand, Sudha's father left nothing other than debts for her. As a result Sudha could not perform academically well in spite of her being as intelligent as Anju. Moreover, Anju receives a lot of reinforcement from her educated mother and she keeps on winning the competitions such as spelling bees and debate contests in the college. Sudha, on the other hand, does well with her cooking, knitting and crocheting even if she can't outshine as Anju could. Sudha chooses to be traditional that also demands a lot of courage and tolerance.

I want to design clothes, she says. Salwaar kameezes. Pleated wedding ghagras with mirrors stitched in. Kurtas for men, embroidered white on white silk. Babay frocks in



satin and eyelet lace. I want to have my own company, with my own tailors and my own label, so that customers at all the best stores will ask for the Basudha brand. People in Bombay and Delhi and Madras will clamour for my work. (Divakaruni: 1999: 90)

In *The Mistress of Spices* Tilo the pivotal character or the Mistress of Spices. Hers is a 'round character' because she has several aspects to her character and as a 'round' or 'dynamic' character she develops herself in the course of time. Tilo owns a 'Spice Store' in America - Oakland, California. She not only sells Indian Spices but also helps her customers in solving their problems through her magical power of reading their mind and heart. Divakaruni treats the 'spices' as the real life characters in the novel. They are personified as characters with peculiar qualities. However, all the spices appear to be 'flat characters' as they would remain unchanged and stable throughout the novel. Each Indian Spice owing to their unique myth and history becomes the instrument to extend the narrative plot in a dramatic and in a significant way. All spices are characterized with certain mythical impressions in curing certain diseases or has been used during the festivals. As Harrison puts it, the characterization is a literary device which enables the narration of the character as someone or something. The art or concept of creating characters, as practiced by actors or writers is called characterization (Harrison: 51-2). In a narrative plot, an authors narrates the characters with illustrative, figurative, metaphorical and descriptive images with coherent situations to support the development of their respective personalities.

Divakaruni introduces Tilo directly through 'telling method' in the novel. Divakaruni chooses to narrate the story in the first person narrative technique also known as fictitious autobiography. Tilo describes her own character and life. In the



first chapter of the novel Tilo states: "I am a Mistress of Spices...I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells...Their heat runs in my blood. From *amchur* to *zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers." (Divakaruni: 2005: 3)

Tilo is the pseudonym of Tilottama (that represents her being an Indian), but she gets it changed to be known with her nick name Tilo in America. Her original name Tilottama is symbolic of a myth in very early Vedic age of India. She is the goddess of power, mysticism and knowledge (Pattanaik 85). Here in this novel she represents the same cosmic energy and divine strength to acquire authority over spices. Spices are alike mythical, supernatural 'Devas' assigned special power for specific diagnosis (The Devas may be closest to God but they are not God. Like demons and humans, their chitta is plagued with restlessness. They too seek the serenity of the param-atma. Their pleasures of life had to be kept in check if they sought happiness (Pattanaik 51-2).

Tilo was born as an unusual girl in a remote village of a faraway land. She has the special skill of finding hidden things from the eyes of other humans. The news of her special power spreads all over and reaches to the pirates who come to her house and kill her entire family. The pirates capture her to become their "treasure finder". After a few years, she escapes from their boat and with the help of sea-serpents reaches to "The Island". It is here that she meets the Old whom she refers as The Mother. At the island she starts learning from the mother about the spices and their magical powers.

But the power has laid down strict rules to be followed as the price for becoming *The Mistress of Spices*. The rules includes that she has to give up the world, she has love nothing other than the spices. She has to confine herself to the place where she lives



with the spices neither she should use the spices for her own self. At the time of the final ceremony, she takes these vows and she chooses her name as “Tilo”, apparently after the spice ‘sesame’. Nevertheless, she secretly was naming herself after the most beautiful of the heavenly beauties: Tilottama. The mother, who taught her the magical powers of the spices knows the passionate nature of Tilo. She therefore warns Tilo to be on her guard when she leaves the island to go San Francisco to serve the community. The ultimate consequence of breaking any of these rules is only one: the mistress has to enter the fire and invite the complete annihilation of herself.

Thus, all four novels depict the female protagonist in order to represent the pain and agony of expatriate authors. Be it Meera, Sandhya or Draupadi, be it Tilo, Anju or Sudha all female characters serve the purpose of being the spokespersons of the authors who share common experience of the identity crisis and their exposure to the multiculturalism. Even minor women characters voice the tone and texture of the protagonists. On the contrary, the male characters of the novels appears to be flat and prototypes of patriarchal society of India and abroad alike. Most male characters are not fully developed or depicted by the authors. One can say that the female protagonists have overshadowed the male characters of all the novels throughout the narratives.



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