INTRODUCTION

A. Contemporary Indian Women’s Poetry in English: at a Glance

Indian English writing is a colourful spectrum of poetry, drama, and fiction. It represents the transition of India from the colonial to the post-Independence period. It interweaves the complexity of Indian experience through its regional involvements and international affiliations. It is presented through English and is enriched by the experiences of Diaspora writers. Modern Indian poetry finds one of its authentic voices in English. The new poets write in English and are aware of the powerful oral presence of their mother tongues. The knowledge of the past and experiences of the present come out as a creative dialogue between the ‘self’ and the ‘outer world’. Experience and language fuse into a creative pattern of articulation. Charismatic figures like Tagore and Aurobindo dominated the literary scene before the Independence and experimented with the English language with vigour and patriotic zeal. They expressed their subjectivity and the total aspiration of India.

The appearance of pioneer women poets, Toru Dutt (1856-1887) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) is an important development in Indian English poetry. Their poetry emerged out of a new awareness. However, it is mainly influenced by British Romantic Tradition and is replete with themes such as love, nature, and aesthetic passion for beauty. In spite of the direct and intense exposure to the West, they remained traditional in their poetic sensibility. This scenario changed with the rise of 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, Ira De, Sujata Mathai, Mamta Kalia, Suniti Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande, Kamala Das and others.
The contemporary women poets deviate from the depiction of traditional pattern of Indian womanhood and articulate their feelings without any inhibitions. They register their discontent against the oppressed situation of women. In traditional Indian society, women are confined to home making, child bearing and child rearing which affect their personality and identity. The need for flexibility, adjustment, and submissiveness is inculcated in them from childhood. On the contrary, all of the Indian women poets in English belong to the highly modernized, urban, affluent, and scholarly families. This contrast gives rise to certain inevitable tension in personal and social life of women poets. Therefore, they rebel against the conventional role of woman in the society and struggle to assert their own identity as independent, individualistic, and conscious participants in experience. They mark the evolution of the Indian feminine psyche from the tradition to modernity by moving away from the traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women. They emphasize on the search of identity.

The Indian women poets often write in confessional mode with the prominence of topics such as guilt, sexuality, ambition, memories of past, rebellions, conflicts, shame, childhood, love affairs, and articulation of fractured self. The poets allude to their personal life, desire, moods, values, and hope. Their poetry focuses on the actuality of family and personal life. The theme of love has always been the centre of attention of the poets all over the world. The Indian women poets have also dealt with love and sexuality as major concerns. Some of them are exclusively concerned with the problem of man-woman relationship. They write about the intensity of love, which becomes painful for them because it involves slavish attachment and leads to frustration and acceptance of identity as lonely being. Kamala Das and Gauri Deshpande are the women poets who frankly write about the sexual aspect of love with the
full awareness of its physical aspect. The poetry tends to receive less publicity and glamour as compared to the novel. Still there is a remarkable flowering of women’s poetry as it provides them the scope for self-expression without any inhibition. The women’s poetry has been working since its inception as the indicator of the growth of the feminine consciousness. Women poets have added new dimension to Indian poetry in English by their intense and direct explorations in the man-woman relationship with reference to love and sex. S.P. Chavan observes, “the comparison of love poetry by men with that written by women shows that women are more realistic, direct, intense and explorative than men” (Chavan113). Also they are more intense, authentic and urgent than men in conveying the sense of frustration, disappointment and loneliness in love.

Apart from love, nature is another theme of Indian women poets in English. Otherwise, poetry by women has remained mainly personal. The tradition of isolating woman from social life and restricting her role to the family life results in the choice of family as the only field of interest. However, with the growing opportunities of the exposure to the environment, the women poets exhibit commitment to environment. As compared to earlier women poets, the contemporary women poets are unwilling to respond to the beauties of nature. In their occasional poems, nature tends to be the symbol of past, childhood, places, and social ironies of modern life. In the poetry of Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt, there is a tendency to treat a river with reference to cultural experience than as a natural phenomenon. They are also giving justice to social responsibility by probing into contemporary social concerns. The poetry composed by city dweller women poets depicts the din and dust, squalor, poverty, misery, exploitation of labour in age of industrialization. It deals with dehumanization of the new rich, slums,
environmental pollutions, horrors of war and world peace, love and sex, anxiety of living single and human relationship. A certain degree of awareness of the world situation in the terms of violence, sufferings, fanaticism is manifested in the poems of Meena Alexander, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, and Imtiaz Dharker.

The poetry of exile has acquired significant position in the realm of Indian English poetry. The women poets of Indian Diaspora have migrated to and settled in various countries like Denmark, Germany, Australia, England, and USA. Theirs is the self-exile and the reasons are the greater opportunities outside India: marriage, jobs, education, and desire for adventure. Though they have settled abroad, they are connected to Indian soil and differ from Western behavioral pattern. They are expected to follow Indian cultural determinants and their literary works are foregrounded by their female experiences of double marginalization and gender discrimination. The Diaspora women poets have reacted to the immigrant experiences in various ways. Their poetry reflects the tensions caused by their Indian psyche in the alien situation. During the last fifty years, there has been an outburst of Indian women’s poetry in English published in India and abroad. It has become a global network with the outsiders in many countries like Sujata Bhatt in Germany, Meena Alexander, and Chitra Banerjee in the USA, and Debjani Chatterjee in England.

The contemporary women poets have been influenced by the variety of influences. By dealing with wide range of themes, they have generated diverse poetic expressions. They have tried to speak in a distinctly personal voice and formed a chorus, a collective voice asserting the autonomy of women. However, the poetry of women poets tends to be marginalized because of the discriminative tendencies of reception to their writings. In writing poetry, women are allotted a personal but not
public space, a private, but not a political or rhetorical voice. Therefore, women poets have often raised their voice against social and cultural conventions. They challenged the restrictions on freedom and subjection of women. They believe that women need to explore collective unconscious and shared experience in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of their lives. In order to contest the challenges of marginalization, social and artistic exclusion, the poetry of Indian women poets brings forth the suppressed desires, lust, sexuality, and gestational experiences.

Naik and Narayan have classified the contemporary women poets in three groups. The first group is comprised of Kamala Das and her contemporaries who continue to write after 1980. They are Mamta Kalia, Suniti Namjoshi, Margaret Chatterjee, and Sujata Mathai. Under the category of ‘new poets’ there is a sizeable group of the poets from the school called ‘Bombay poets’ associated with Nissim Ezekiel, the father of modern Indian poetry. The women poets in this school are Eunice de Souza, Tara Patel, Kavita Ezekiel, Imtiaz Dharker, Charmayne D’Souza, Melanie Silgardo, Menka Shivadasani and Mukta Sambrani. The third group is of several other poets elsewhere in India and abroad such as Sunita Jain, Meena Alexander, Lakshmi Kannan, Suma Josson, Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Vasantha Surya.

However, the researcher classifies the contemporary Indian women poets in five groups. South Indian women poets who strongly claim their South Indian heritage including Kamala Das, Anna Sujatha Mathai, Lakshmi Kanan and Vasantha Surya; the outsider – insiders like Margaret Chatterjee and Imtiaz Dharker who received Indian identity through marriage with Indians; poets of urban life such as Tara Patel, Eunice Desouza, Menka Shivadasani, Mukta Sambrani, Kavita Ezekiel, Charmeyne Desouza; the bilingual poets like Sunita Jain and
Mamta Kalia who wrote both in Hindi and English. And finally the poets of Indian Diaspora; Shanta Acharya, Sujata Bhatt, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Rachana Joshi, Chitra Banerjee-Divakaruni, Debjani Chatterjee and Meena Alexander. The contribution of contemporary Indian women poets in English reveals the range of their talent. It evinces that Indian women poets in English have successfully appropriated the language and made it a vehicle of their own cultural experience and expression. Their poetry is significant because it has tried to question the commodification of women as bodies. It has dealt with feminist issues and raised voice against oppression of women.

An effort to place Meena Alexander in the tradition of contemporary women poets leads to the conclusion that she is the inseparable part of this tradition with some distinctive features. Her poetry has wide range of reference because of her sojourn in abroad for number of years and roots firmly planted in her native soil of Kerala. A strong political awareness is the striking feature of her poetry, which we can hardly find in contemporary women poets except Rukmini Bhaya Nair who has written on demolition of the Babri Masjid and Imtiaz Dharker who has dealt with theme of riots. Based on similarities her poetry can be studied with the poetry of Sujata Bhatt, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Shanta Acharya as they share some common aspects of diasporic life: nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation, questions of language and identity, of belonging and not belonging and problems of living as a female body in immigrant situation. Her poetry resembles to Kamala Das regarding the themes like memories of childhood, family relations, grandmothers, and family’s great house in Kerala. In Das’s poetry, we find the complaints, attacks, demands for freedom and sexual enjoyment. On the contrary, Alexander’s poetry is not obsessed with the bare sex but maintains the sexual sublimity. Alexander shares common ancestry with
Anna Sujata Mathai as both of them belong to the Mar Thoma community of Tiruvella. Alexander’s poetry could be studied beneficially with that of Sujata Bhatt and Debjani Chatterjee with reference to the theme of lost mother tongue and alienation caused due to writing in English. Her poetry shares the common features with the poetry of Margaret Chatterjee in the use of phrases and evocative images. It could be studied comparatively in terms of poetic devices, and imagery with the poetry of Tara Patel and Menka Shivadasani. It could be studied beneficially with reference to poetic diction and images with the poetry of Shanta Acharya. Her poetry is highly symbolical and complex like the poetry of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats.

**B. Meena Alexander: Life and Works**

Meena Alexander was born in 1951 in Allahabad, India. She has tackled the questions of exile, race, gender, sexuality, violence, cultural differences, and multiple identities in her poems and novels. She makes use of her various cultural experiences and memories of the past to cope with present. Through an articulation of her multicoloured experiences, she provides clue to her complex identity. She lives in the alien space and writing in search of place becomes the voyage of self-discovery for her.

She spent her childhood in North India, in Allahabad. Her father had his first posting as a meteorologist there. Still the very regular visits to Kerala connect her deeply to the homeland. Tiruvella and Kozencheri provide the touch of the native soil of Kerala and her physical, psychological, religious, spiritual, and social roots are anchored there. After early childhood in Allahabad, shifting to Pune and regular visits to Kerala, there came the crossing of borders to Khartoum days as her father got job in newly independent Republic of Sudan. She celebrated the fifth birthday on the Arabian Sea during her first ocean crossing. Since then
her life became the story of multiple crossings spending six months in Kerala and other six months in Khartoum.

Kerala remained in her memory with closer affections and enriched her imagination. She started her career as teenager in Khartoum. The two fold processes of protesting against and liberating from the burden of being born in female body and initiation of creative sensibility are started in Khartoum days. The beginning of her writing at the age of ten or eleven caused great anxiety to her mother because the writing life demands expressiveness, which is “quite contrary to the reticence that feminity requires” (FL 113).

As a result of multiple migrations and settlement in foreign land, the mother tongue Malayalam remained at the oral level only giving her the feel of alienation and ‘lost language’. On the contrary, in Khartoum she learnt English from a Scottish teacher. She is caught between the “terror of babble” and the “terror of nonsense” as expressed in the essay ‘Exiled by a Dead Script’ (Alexander 1) and tries to dissolve the burden of English language by understanding the sound and sense of Arabic and Malayalam. Language becomes crucial matter for the poet, as she knew multiple languages such as Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, English, and French. The violence involved in learning English, the colonizer’s language had a tangible effect on her urge to subvert the linguistic patterns of English language. She experienced the racial set-up as ‘the first non-white child’ at Clergy House School in Khartoum. The experience of colour discrimination was bitter for the child of six years and she poignantly states, “My blackness stuck out like a stiff halo all around me” (FL 113).

After completing high school education at the age of thirteen, she entered Khartoum University. There she participated in street demonstrations organized by the students to raise voice against Southern
Sudanese problem, with her friends Sarra and Azza Anis. She had inherited these seeds of rebellion from her nationalist maternal grandparents. She insists that, “It must be possible for all human beings to struggle towards equality and social justice, to live in a world without unnecessary suffering” (Alexander FL 117). On the advice of her examiner at Khartoum University, she joined Nottingham University to pursue her Ph.D. She experienced the burden of colonization and femaleness there. She was blamed for publishing papers outside the area of study, British Romanticism, and modern poetry.

In the last year at Nottingham, she had fallen in love with a Dutch man Maxim, a scholar from Amsterdam. However, she returned to India. Her purpose in returning was to reclaim and preserve her Indian identity as she writes, “(In the) British culture,… I always felt that what I really was, was being left out as an Indian woman and also as someone. . . from the third world . . . I couldn’t have survived in England. And not because of anything in other people; I felt that I had to go back to India” (Alexander Dispatch 25). She returned to India in 1974 and joined teaching at Miranda House in Delhi.

In 1975, she worked as a CSIR Fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University and then moved to Hyderabad, first to Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages and then to the University of Hyderabad where she could deal with the questions of poetry. However, the question of English and its belongingness in India stayed with her. During this period, she got many friends including writers, social activists, academics, and feminists. She met her husband David Lelyveld, a Jewish American Historian first in Hyderabad. Within three weeks of their first meeting, they decided to get married and then as a pregnant bride, she made her continental crossing to New York subverting mother’s expectation of arranged marriage. Spending a year in teaching at
Minneosta, she settled in New York with her husband and two children Adam and Svati. At present, she is a professor at Hunter College and Graduate Centre of the City University of New York.

Her experience of being a ‘Unwhite’ in America was reminiscent of her stay in England and results in a kind of psychic trauma out of which she recovers through her own sense of self-affirmation. The experience of racial hatred in ‘You black bitch’ (FL 169) stuns and injures her sense of being and raises doubt about survival “Where I am? Who am I?” (FL 176).

Meena Alexander seems to transgress all boundaries with an ease and a struggle to rise above them. She is establishing herself on several fronts as a child, as a creative writer, as a woman and as an expatriate in America, exploring into the issue of ethnicity. Her perceptions about the self and life have been elaborated by a series of journeys –from Kerala to Khartoum, back to Kerala for the summer break, the Ph.D. study at Nottingham in Britain, and then to US, New York and again back to Bombay and further to Kerala.

Within the group of South Asian women struggling with the burden of writing in English, Meena Alexander has established herself as a solid phenomenon by producing substantial work of poetry, prose, and fiction. She has published twelve collections of poetry, two novels, two autobiographical works and her Ph.D. dissertation under the title *The Poetic Self*, two critical books and several articles, research papers and short stories on contemporary issues. Majority of her works are autobiographical and reveal the psychological trauma of multiple migrations. However they reach beyond the personal life and go on to explore the simple human experiences of longing, love, and loss.

She began her writing at the age of ten. For her writing is the music of survival. The separation from motherland and her beloved grandfather
Ilya made her to write secretly in order to compensate the loss of people and places. It helped her to restore the lost world. Therefore, she writes in an essay ‘Composing Poetry’, “In composing poetry, I am composing myself” (Alexander145). She began writing poetry with Arabic speakers in Khartoum. Her first efforts in French were translated into Arabic for her circle of university friends. They were published in the main newspaper in Khartoum, but she could not read her first publications.

The serious effort of writing poetry began in England as it was the period of struggle, exile, alienation, and victimization of racial experience. The *Bird’s Bright Ring* (1976) is a long poem divided into sixteen movements of varying length with final coda of thirteen verses. Most of the lines are one or two words long. The poem is poet’s random reflection on the human condition in the chaotic world of today where blindness blooms and dark hollows are visible everywhere. The use of dramatic monologue, and stream of consciousness technique, symbolism and mythological allusions raise the poem to the level of wise and thoughtful utterance. The poem is full of melancholy strain, sings of the devastation of mortality. It describes life as our breathing lamentation and expresses nihilistic and pessimistic worldview.

The next volume, *I Root My Name* (1977) is a collection of eighteen lyrics of varying lengths on courtship, death, degeneration of the world and various other subjects. The mood of the poem is sad and melancholy which comes out of loss of self, of people and places, of identity and of nation. The loss makes the desire of being rooted very prominent in the poet and it can happen only through verses because she knew that, “If poetry is the music of survival, place the instrument on which that music is played, the gourd, the strings, the fret” (Alexander ‘Composing Poetry’ 144).
In *Without Place* (1978), Alexander realizes that poetry is place. The collection exposes the hazards of modern aesthetic alienation and inherent sense of exile involved in writing poetry in the colonial language by an Indian immigrant poet. In order to refuse the alienation caused by writing in “a nowhere language” (WP ix), the poet breaks its syntax and grammatical rules and expresses her Indian sensibility and affects decolonization of English language. Her poetry comes out of her exile status and particularly out of the inevitable immigrant mentality trying to create a personal identity.

Alexander continued writing both poetry and prose after she moved to United States. She published *Stone Roots* in 1980. She reconstitutes her stone roots and nourishes herself through writing the poems that are rooted in the soil and the landscape of a village in South India. The crisis of being homeless compels her to find place in her strong roots of the past. Therefore, Alexander creates the imaginary figure of her female ancestors in *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988). It is Alexander’s first volume of poetry published in America. This is collection of poems and some prose pieces, with a deep sense of memory from childhood spent in Kerala and North Africa, education in England and University career in New York. She sticks to her matriarchal tradition in search of past. She draws upon her political, intellectual, and emotional sources from her two grandmothers, who appear in poem after poem in the collection. It is a rich and comprehensive account of herself and her roots. The collection treats variety of themes including two grandmothers and her attachment to them, writing, houses, childbirth. Some poems are addressed to Jayanta Mahapatra and Dorothy Wordsworth.

*The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts* (1989) and *Night Scene, the Garden* (1992) are long autobiographical poems. The *Storm* is interspersed with theme of displacement, dislocation, violence, and
ritualized order and woman’s experiences of the world as female and immigrant. The poetic sequence in several voices in *Night Scene, the Garden* muses on the experience of birth of daughter Svati and connects her to the past, her mother, and grandmothers. The father’s memories, fate of several women, the illegal possession of house by a crook, its repossession, and the subsequent aftermath form the major part. However, the most significant theme is a childhood experience in a garden when Alexander felt she could only possess the world by being a poet.

Alexander wrote about women and Romanticism in *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley* (1989). Her Ph.D. dissertation developed into *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979) gives indication of philosophical strength that shaped both her experimental material and her approach to poetry itself. It also reflects her highly intellectual awareness of historical and literary continuities from Romanticism to post-symbolist aesthetics. The study of Romanticism has shaped Alexander’s interest and attitudes as Bruce King writes in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, “She has written about phenomenology and women in Romanticism, her poetry is similarly concerned with the creation of the self especially the feminine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad” (king310).

Before Alexander moved to the US, she had completed a draft of her first novel, *Nampally Road* and published it in 1991. It is significant for her because it is the work that “marks a crossing, a border” (FL 160). Alexander perceives the fact of exiled life where she must redefine, re-discover and restate her and seeks refuge in *Nampally Road*. The novel is written in semi-autobiographical mode. It uses Alexander’s own background, first in Kerala, then in North Africa, subsequently in Nottingham, England and finally back in India during the Emergency in
Mira Kannadical is the protagonist of novel identical with the writer herself. She attempts to make sense of her own troubled past and future. It treats the issues of contemporary India such as political corruption, colonial education, police brutality, subjugation of women, and communal strife.

Alexander’s autobiography *Fault Lines* (1993) explores the deepest and remotest corners of her being while living as a dark skinned and displaced woman. The first person narrative gives comprehensive statement of her selfhood, explains her, and states her position with the pressure of her ‘Femaleness’ and ‘Her un-whiteness’. The issues of identity, ethnicity, fracturing of the self, memories of past, childhood, burden of using colonial language and being born in female body, and racial discrimination have been explored to emphasize the complexity of living in multicultural society.

The Collection *River and Bridge* (1995) is divided into four sections, ‘News of the World’, ‘Mandala’, ‘Blood Line’ and ‘San Andreas Fault’. It depicts largely the world corrupted by violence and made sorrowful by an inescapable sense of dislocation. There are also poems about the mother experiencing the birth of child as the birth of another self. *River and Bridge* establishes her as one of the finest contemporary poets and proves her as the most disciplined poet speaking about different cultures, countries, and violent events there. Another autobiographical work *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) is about the shock of new life. It explores the questions of identity, Diaspora, ethnicity, language, femaleness, and community discriminatory practices. *Manhattan Music* (1977) is also autobiographical novel depicting the life of Indian immigrant married to a Jewish American and settled in US with him. In
Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship.

The poetic collection *Illiterate Heart* (2002) is dedicated to the memory of father. It uses memory as a medium and metaphor to depict the narrative of loss. Act of writing, for the poet becomes an effort to recapture and preserve the past, places and people. Her experience of exile is translated into the intimate exploration of a connection to both India and America. In *Raw Silk* (2004), she has reflected on the theme of the aftermath of 9/11 to grapple with the very public nature of terror and violence that had affected the life in US. It reflects the surrealism of life in the aftermath of 9/11. It also portrays variety of violent incidents in the US and in the world outside its borders.

Author of such works on very contemporary issues has received several honours throughout her career. They are an Altrusa International Award (1973), Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York Research Foundation Awards (1989, 90), McDowell Colony Fellowships (1993, 1998), the New York State Foundation for the Arts Poetry Award (1999), a PEN Open Book Award (2002, for *Illiterate Heart*) and a Residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center (2005). Her memoir *Fault Lines* was chosen as one of publishers weekly Best Book of 1993.

She is highly acclaimed poet who tries to make an explicit connection between her own past in the Kerala and distinct but comparable experience of loss felt in the alien country. She writes for survival creating the connections between the legacies of cultural traditions and the burden of racialized identity in the US. Much of her work is concerned with migration and its impact on her subjectivity and with violent events like partition, massacres, carnage, and 9/11. Out of the trauma of multiple migrations, Alexander emerged as a significant
voice of Diaspora. With many inland and abroad literary influences, she has earned a respectable place among Indian women poets in English. However, the topic of the present study is restricted to the study of Alexander’s poetry only. Since she is an accomplished poet using her multicultural background to its fullest effect, her poems have significant themes.

The multiple migrations, affluent family background, exposure to the various movements and incidents in the world, study of Western poetics and phenomenology for Ph.D. are the multiple factors that have played an important role in awakening of Alexander’s cultural and literary awareness. Her deep-rooted family ties and interpersonal relationships with grandparents, parents, teachers, friends, cousins, aunts, uncles, and servants in Tirvella, Kozencheri, and Khartoum have proved to be important influences in the process of her growing up, shaping the identity, and selfhood. Her nationalist maternal grandparents who were the staunch followers of Mahatma Gandhi introduced her to the idea of New India based on land reform and equality. They inculcated the ideological, political, and social consciousness in the poet’s mind.

She has received special spiritual nourishment from Ilya (maternal grandfather). He acquainted her with the sounds and sights of nature as well as the early concepts of theology and god. He made her aware of the outer world. He used to compose Katha and recite them for her. The stories from the Bible, the Mahabharata, or of Buddha or adventure stories of a girl Susikali became the substance of her awakening consciousness. He enlarged the horizon of poet’s perception by talking with her quite seriously about time, the Buddha, mortality, suffering and encouraged her to read Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, the Bible, Tolstoy, Marx, Zola and Flaubert. Even poet owes her feminists consciousness to grandfather and her father, the male members of family because they
encouraged her to do what she wants. On the contrary, her paternal grandfather was a feudal landlord with large holdings of land and middlemen and overseers working for him. He represents the magnificent, oppressive feudal landlords who exploit poor and downtrodden for their own benefit. He was afraid of communists because they were against landlords. However, contrary to it, the poet’s work manifests the affinity towards communist thought. She advocates the rights of poor and labourers.

The two grandmothers: Kanda and Mariamma influence her existence as a person born in female body and her emergence as a feminist. Kanda, the sensitive, cultured woman had influenced the social awareness of the poet and represents feminist side of her consciousness. The other grandmother Mariamma always emphasized the control of female body by insisting to learn feminine arts like cooking, and sewing. She restricted poet from going in the sun due to fear of becoming dark. Thus, paternal grandmother introduced the boundaries created by being female body while maternal grandmother inspires to transgress them. However, both of them connect the poet to the ancestral roots in homeland. Her father was trying to inculcate in her religious understanding and sentiments and mother gave her instructions in the method and art of recognizing herself as a woman: “decorum, perfect, sober dressing, learning the trick of silence, the female invisibility” (FL 106). However, her father encouraged her to write and publish.

In Khartoum, she was impressed by quotes from Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, and Wallace Stevens. During her doctoral research on British Romanticism, William Wordsworth became the presiding deity of her poetry. Lavina Dhingra observes that Alexander’s poetry is “obsessed with place and memories like William Wordsworth and exhibits Percy Shelley’s curious blend of political activism” (Dhingra3). As her study at
Nottingham grew, she became interested in the romantic, symbolist, and modern poets and philosophers. She was reading Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau Ponty there.

The inspiration for Alexander comes from her association with the tradition of medieval Bhakti and Sufi poetry. Her works abound with multiple references to Rumi, Kabir, Mirabai and Akkamahadevi. She draws on the Indian tradition of mysticism. Akkamahadevi and Mirabai are the feminist icons for Alexander as they have transgressed many of the established and accepted norms of feminine behaviour. By fusing the Western Romantic lyric tradition with non-Western Bhakti and Sufi poetry, Alexander creates kind of hybrid aesthetics.

After joining Miranda House in Delhi, she came across important personages. She experienced the political movement in the march led by J. P. Narayan in 1975, in Delhi against the Emergency. Through her association with the Philosopher Society at St. Stephen’s College, meeting with Ramu Gandhi and exposure to the poor children picking rags by the truck stops Alexander discovered more of India in Delhi. Ramu Gandhi had been great influence on shaping her thoughts, feelings and being. Her years at Delhi had so vital influence on her. She was introduced to the atrocities against women and participated in demonstrations against dowry deaths and bride burning. During her sojourn in India, Meena Alexander came across people and events that acquired significant posts in her life. Meeting Faiz Ahmed Faiz in Hyderabad, Jayanta Mahapatra in Cuttack and Uma Shankar Joshi enriched her own sense of poetry. She was also exposed to progressive grass root movement like Chipko in which Indian women played a leading role and inspired other struggles for environment protection worldwide. All these movements and people have been proved at least an indirect or unconscious impact in shaping Alexander as a sensitive poet.
Alexander was fascinated by powerful language of Sarojini Naidu’s political speeches. The poet was influenced by the way, in which Naidu used the English language for the purpose of decolonization and registering resistance against colonizers. Jayanta Mahapatra has greatly inspired her as he had taught her how landscape can slip the lines of a poem. She understood importance of place for a poet through her interaction with Jayanta Mahapatra. Some of her poems are dedicated to him and his wife. Alexander read Kamala Das’s poetry with great care and was impressed by her way of expressing desire. Poet herself has admitted the influence of Kamala Das and her poems in which she spoke of a Kerala house and a lost grandmother. Through reading Bharati Mukherjee’s work in USA, she understood the possibility of living and being a writer and having a place in the multicultural society. Aga Shahid Ali, a contemporary friend of Alexander was important to her in terms of poetry. She read Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Michael Ondaatje and taught their works and published papers. A. K. Ramanujan had played crucial role for her in learning how to write and his poetry tries to make sense of American world in which she lives. Arundhati Roy’s fiction is so close for her because it is set in small town twelve miles from where her mother lives in central Travancore. She appreciated the works of younger South Asian artists like Suketu Mehta and enjoyed reading at conferences with Sashi Tharoor and Bapsi Sidhwa.

Alexander always writes about home and childhood and her technique has been influenced by Western literary tradition. Bruce King writes in the Review of *Night Scene, the Garden*, “T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is present in some phrasing, rhyming, and construction” (King444) in *Night Scene, the Garden*. On the contrary, for Satpathy, her poetry resembles to that of W. B. Yeats. She has learnt from Yeats the use of short lines. Though Alexander’s work is shaped by Indian history,
it also simultaneously exhibits the influence of transnational and immigrant experience.

Along with the tradition of homeland, Alexander’s mind has been influenced by the experience of immigrant subjectivity and the experience of being the racial and ethnic minority in the US. She loved the work of Frantz Fanon who thinks and writes about the geography of dislocation and inhuman effect of colonization. She admires Wallace Stevens and always repeats his lines in her mind because he speaks of the imagination as violence from within that works against the violence from without. Still she is aware of her hyphenated identity and she admits in *Fault Lines* that “Steven’s world is not mine” (Alexander 195). Thus, Alexander’s mind and work have been moulded by the intellectual, linguistic and cultural legacies of both her education and the indigenous traditions of her Indian and particularly Kerala roots.

An objective review of the relevant literature published and research already carried out on Meena Alexander is quite essential in order to determine the focal point of the proposed research. A number of scholars have written about Alexander’s contribution to literature in English. Several articles and reviews have been featured in various journals and anthologies in India, U.S., and England on her poetry, novels, and memoir. Makarand Paranjape in the introduction of his edited collection *Indian Poetry in English* puts Alexander under the category of neo romantics. Bruce King in his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English* reviews Alexander’s poetry and remarks, “Her poetry resembles that of Jayant Mahapatra” (King 311).

The researcher has tried to acquaint herself with the doctoral dissertations submitted in various universities in India such as Vanaja V.’s Ph.D. thesis entitled, “Political Ideology in the novels of Nayantara Sahagal and Meena Alexander: A Feminist Perspective”, Krishnakumari

Apart from these major studies, Alexander’s creative and theoretical works have attracted enthusiastic critical interests. Several distinguished postcolonial, women’s studies, Asian, American, Cultural studies scholars, including Rashmi Rustomji Kerns, Susie Tharu, Ruth Maxey, Deepika Bahri, Ali Zainab, Dharini Rasiah, Ayisha Abraham, Inderpal Grewal and Mary Vasudeva, have published critical interviews with her. Scholarly articles were written on Alexander’s works by critics like John Oliver Perry, Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Chitra Banerjee - Divakaruni, M. Dolores Herrero, Rebeca Sultana, and Reshmi Dutt Ballerstadt. The reviews of Alexander’s novels, autobiographical works, and poetic collections have been written by the eminent scholars like Bruce King, M. K. Naik and Shamala Narayan, John Perry, Lakshmi Kanan, Chelva Kanganayakam, Makarand Paranjape, Ravindra Swain, S. Satpathy, Roshni Rustomji Kerns in reputed international journals. Several doctoral dissertations in the US have also focused on Alexander’s work. Among them are those of Anupama Jain and Rashmi Dutt Ballerstadt, which deal partly with Alexander’s work. A very few others like Jaspal Kaur Singh, have published chapters on Alexander’s texts as part of a larger book.

Though Alexander has been widely anthologized and applauded as a contemporary South Asian American poet and thinker, the focus of the research is mainly on her novels and memoirs and only partly on the
poetry. No extensive work exclusively on Meena Alexander’s poetry inclusive of variety of themes and techniques has been done. The researcher feels that there is need for detailed study of her poetic world wherein her social and political consciousnesses meet with the personal life to form the realistic perspective of immigrant’s life. The thematic study of Alexander’s poetry adds to the knowledge of indigenous culture. As well as it focuses on Diaspora experiences in multicultural state, implications of violence and hazards in the age of globalization. The explorations into the techniques would add to the knowledge of literary aesthetics of Alexander’s poetry. Therefore, researcher intends to study the themes and techniques in her poetry.

The present study is an exploration in the thematic aspects of Meena Alexander’s poetry and is supplied with study of techniques. It aims at a deeper understanding of variety of consciousnesses developing in her poetry. The poems are to be analyzed with focus on variety of themes and techniques in them. The study intends to develop an enquiry into variety of themes: diasporic consciousness, feminist consciousness, violence, and terrorism, racial experiences, subaltern voice, resistance, history and myths, notions of lost language, and death. An attempt will be made to focus techniques in her poetry in order to explore the making of her poetry as her poetry is shaped by the distinctive use of techniques such as poetic devices, poetic diction, imagery, and symbolism.

Meena Alexander’s work is of great interest to diverse academic fields as it is full of many contemporary issues. However, there has been a remarkable neglect in study of poetry in contemporary scholarship. Poets have been marginalized in the discussion of literature because literary works have been read as representations of the social and political realities of their societies of origin. Therefore, the present study is significantly important as it attempts to explore that the poet also leads
to more subtle and complex insights about their societies. It focuses on the social, political, and cultural realities of Indian and immigrants’ life reflected in Meena Alexander’s poetry along with the discussion of technical aspects. The present study has taken into consideration the ten volumes of Alexander’s poetry published up to 2004. They are as follows:

1. *The Bird’s Bright Ring* (1976)
2. *I Root My Name* (1977)
7. *Night Scene, the Garden* (1992)

Her novels, memoir, prose pieces, articles, reviews, and other non-poetic works will not be a part of this study. However, these works and interviews have been used to understand the background and to support the observations and findings. A critical appreciation of her poetry is done by using analytical and interpretative methods and the method of practical criticism to explore the themes and techniques. The traditional descriptive method is followed to sort out the themes and techniques. After categorizing according to themes and techniques poems are discussed to put forward the argument. No fieldwork has been taken up to study the themes and techniques. The seventh edition of MLA style is followed.

The references from poet’s life, her exiled experience, and the contemporary political and social situations are taken into consideration
to interpret the poems. The biographical method and sociological method are used to explore the thematic patterns underflowing Alexander’s poetry. The poetry is interpreted to specify the meanings of its language by analysis, paraphrasing and by commentary on the obscure, ambiguous and figurative stanzas. The poetry is interpreted in order to make clear the thematic patterns and technical features by the analysis of poetic devices, imagery, symbolism, and poetic diction. The close reading of the texts has been employed to analyze the poem in order to see how images, metaphors, poetic devices, poetic diction and symbolism form the poem and give particular meaning. The researcher has looked for the telling words or phrases, the recurring or patterned imagery, the symbolic object or character as a hint or clue to the meaning.

It is also intended to probe into the inner tracts of the mind of poet and the social milieu in which she dwells and offer a comprehensive statements on the themes related to culture, politics, and society. The aim of the present study is to attempt a modest and coherent study of Meena Alexander’s poetry, which will enhance the readers’ understanding of her as a major poet of the Indian Diaspora.

The present thesis is entitled “Themes and Techniques in the Poetry of Meena Alexander”. Apart from the introduction, it is divided into six chapters. The introduction focuses on Meena Alexander’s biographical sketch and her emergence as a poet of multicultural diasporic sensibility with high technical excellence. While presenting the ascending graph of her achievement as a creative poet, her poetry, novels, autobiographical works, and critical works are considered. There is a discussion of literary and other influences in order to understand the shaping of poet’s talent. Review of relevant literature is taken to understand the scope of present study. A brief survey of the contemporary
Indian English women poets is offered in order to place Meena Alexander in the tradition of Indian English poetry.

Chapter first of the study is entitled “Themes and Techniques: A Theoretical Perspective” which offers the theoretical framework of the themes and techniques explored in subsequent chapters. Chapter second is entitled “Major Themes”. Alexander’s poetry is full up with the diverse themes, which are highly debated in the academic field. The chapter develops a deep enquiry into the major themes such as diasporic consciousness; exile and loss, migration and creation, memories, search of place and home, quest for identity, feminist consciousness with its various aspects like oppression of women, mother daughter relationship, love, marriage, female sexuality, and issues of Indian women such as dowry deaths, bride burning, forced marriages, and excess of childbirth. The chapter also deals with the various types of violence including colonial violence, partition violence, state violence, religious violence, terrorism, aftermath of 9/11 and wars. The poet covers the racial and ethnic violence, Afghan war, massacre of Tiananmen Square, the Emergency rule, political struggle in Cambodia to exhibit her strong political interest. The focus of the study is mainly on ten collections of poems from The Bird’s Bright Ring to Raw Silk. The texts open into new meaning out of a close reading of her memoir Fault Lines and autobiographical work The Shock of Arrival.

The chapter three entitled “Minor Themes” tackles the themes of racial experiences, resistance, notions of lost language, subaltern voice, history, myth, and death. Chapter fourth is entitled “Poetic Devices and Poetic Diction”. The chapter interprets the poems to specify the meaning of its language by analysis, paraphrase, and commentary on the obscure, ambiguous, and figurative stanzas. There are near about two hundred and fifty figures of speech listed by the critics. However, the major and
recurring poetic devices are listed. The commentary on the poetic diction is offered in order to understand the trend of language in Alexander’s poetry.

Fifth Chapter is entitled “Imagery and Symbolism”. The chapter provides comprehensive interpretation of imagery and symbolism as it is useful in understanding poet’s feelings, thoughts, and working of mind. Alexander’s poetry is overloaded with the imagery of various kinds. The recurring images are discussed in symbolism. The chapter six is a summing up of the conclusions arrived at by the end of investigation. Conclusion is followed by bibliography. Thus introduction has given the brief survey of contemporary Indian women poets in English, review of relevant literature, life and works of Meena Alexander and research design. The next chapter provides the theoretical frameworks of the themes and techniques in the poems of Meena Alexander.