CHAPTER THREE

HOME IN EXILE IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S MANHATTAN MUSIC

Homi K. Bhabha remarks in Nation and Narration:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and emigres and refugees, gatherings on the edge of foreign cultures; gatherings at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centers; gatherings in the half-life, half light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance’ degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of retrieval; gathering the present. Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of the incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status- the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man. The gathering of clouds from which the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks ‘where should the birds fly after the last sky? (291)

Amidst all these ‘gatherings’, the margins of a modern nation, stand redefined when viewed from the perspective of the migrant’s exile. The modern nation disrupts and challenges the logic of linearity, development and progress that are the conventional hallmarks of a nation.

For instance United States of America is not a community of similar people, it is a geopolitical power peopled with natives struggling for land and legal rights, and immigrants with their own histories and memories. Alicia Ortiz
writes about Buenos Aires which indeed is a visualization of the country itself in
Buenos Aires: An Excerpt:

A city without doors. Or rather, a port city, a gateway which never
closes. I have always been astonished by those great cities of the
world which have such precise boundaries that one can say exactly
where they end. Buenos Aires has no end. (76)

The emergence of the modern nation in recent times has been a witness to
mass migration within the west. The nation tries to fill the void left due to
uprooting of communities by turning that loss into a language of metaphor.
Metaphor, as the etymology of the word says, transfers the meaning of home and
belonging, across those distances and cultural differences that span the imagined
communities.

No wonder then that the term nation no more spells historical certainty. Homi K. Bhabha speaks about the unsettled nature of nation and culture in Nation
and Narration He says:

This locality is more around temporality than about historicity, a
form of living that is more complex than community; more
symbolic than society; more connotative than country; less patriotic
than patrie; more rhetorical than the reason of state; more
mythological than ideology; less homogenous than hegemony; less
centered than the citizen; more collective than ‘the subject’; more
psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural
differences and identifications- gender, race or class- than can be
represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social
antagonism.(292)

This cultural construction of nationness reveals the ambivalence of a nation
not just as a form of social affiliation but also as a narrative strategy. It produces
continual slippage into all categories that overlap in the act of writing the nation.
In the words of Edward Said who remarks in *Essays on Postmodern Culture*:

To take account of this horizontal, secular space of the crowded spectacle of the modern nation... implies that no single explanation sending one back immediately to a single origin is adequate. And just as there are no simple dynastic answers, there are no simple discrete formations or social processes. (145)

An awareness of the metaphorical condition of people already referred to calls for what Bhabha labels as "double ness in writing", so that not only are the notions of homogeneity dispersed but also that another time of writing presents ambivalent intersections of time and place which constitutes the modern experience of nation.

Hitherto the boundaries that have marked the nation's selfhood have been oblivious to internal cultural differences and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense cultural locations. The boundaries today are both relational and fluid, for many millions live not in their neatly demarcated nation homes but outside those.

While the flux being witnessed stands to complicate the understanding of home and selfhood, there is also a strange pleasure value attached to it. If we are in exile, we want to store away every tiny memory of our roots or as Parthasarthy has said in *Rough Passage* "There is something to be said for exile, you learn roots are deep". (17) In fact the sacred texts of all the religions were written in exile, in search of God's understanding, of the faith that moves whole peoples, of the pilgrimage of the souls wandering the face of the earth. Julia Kristeva too talks about the pleasure of exile in *The Kristeva Reader* when she says, "How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity." (298)
However location in exile away from home is symptomatic of large number of migrants, nomads and immigrants across the globe. The notions of home, identity, geography and history have become infinitely complicated in the present century. Questions of Nation(ality), and of belonging are constitutive of the Indian diaspora. The popularity of the new literature of immigration is an evidence of the changing and fluid boundaries as also of the typicality of these people's experiences.

Particularly since mid 1990s the mood of the political elite in the US has begun to turn restrictive again, it has added new dimensions to the experiences of the immigrants. That is to say, that the boundaries have disappeared only seemingly. Despite the immigrant's depth of engagement with the host country, he/she remains in exile. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also has remarked in *Feminism Without Borders* in this context:

> In the contemporary American context, the black-white line is rigidly reinforced...in effect then citizenship and immigration laws are fundamentally about defining insiders and outsiders. (67)

Alexander remarks in the narrative, “immigrants always had their problems. Traveling places was hard, staying was harder. You had to open your suitcase, lay out the little bits and pieces into readymade niches. Smooth out the sari, exchange it for a skirt, have your hair trimmed a little differently.”(207)

The questions pertaining to immigrants become even more vicious and intriguing when they deal with the experiences of ‘women of color’ or third world women. The notions of home and community begin to be located within a deeply political space where racialization and gender and class relations and histories become the prism through which the identity of these women is reflected.

Attention may be sought here to the label “resident alien” with which these women came to be addressed in the 1980’s. That is to say one can be a resident or illegal immigrant but one is always an alien. There is no confusion here, no
melting pot ideology or narratives of assimilation: one’s status as an alien is primary. The experience of being an alien – an outsider within the country of residence, further puts woman on the margins in addition to various other layers of marginalization. Journeys across borders thus provoke newer reflections of home and identity.

No wonder then the history and experiences of the nation have now got messier as a result of which neither the concept of nation, nor of narration is linear anymore. However, not to forget that the very act of constructing a narrative – or telling a story – imposes some sort of linearity and coherence that is never entirely there. The observation is even more valid if the narrative deals with the experiences of migrants and immigrants.

In that case the home, community and identity all will fit somewhere between inherited histories and political and social choice. Particularly when this migrant journey deals with a woman; difference, diversity, discrimination, power, privilege, marginalization, exclusion, colonization and oppression become even more complicated concepts, for then any analysis cannot be coagulated into reductionist binary positions.

Meena Alexander’s Manhattan Music is a narrative that fits perfectly the above said descriptions and brings to light yet another category of Indian women: the migrant women. It is a story about Sandhya Rosenblum, an immigrant from India married to an American Jewish man. The narrative traces the journey of her life as she tries to come into terms with her life amidst personal, social and political turbulence.

Alexander at times lyrically and at times vehemently explores the crossing of borders for these women with “Melting Pot theories not withstanding” (Brown Skin, White Mask?, 229), the many inter racial affairs and marriages of these women who “swooned their fles shy away” (Against Elegy, 230), ethnic intolerance in conditions of exile of these “Outcastes all”, who say “let’s conjure honey
scraped from stones” (Art of Pariahs, 231), and their moments of disillusionment as they reach “a bridge that seizes crossing” (River and Bridge, 230).

As the narrative tries to construct Sandhya’s selfhood and identity in a multicultural American city, it reveals experiences and narrative innovations whose range is colossal. Just an approximate mention of the sheer number of geographical locations and cultures that the text alludes to, will give a preliminary peep into the expanse of the narrative range.


As the writer breathlessly drops names of geographical locations from the Far East to the far West, it provides to the narrative historical and cultural anchors through which reflections of home and identity can be seen. It also renders to the narrative a conspicuous multi-cultural flavor, making the narrative a microcosm.
of the global space where histories and cultures interact and overlap but never completely assimilate.

The same also serves a double purpose: it both evokes and erases totalizing boundaries and disturbs those ideological maneuvers through which essentialist identities are forged. From the purely narrative standpoint, such a strategy turns against the Platonic tradition of the privileged pole of the narrative. This kind of zero focalization makes untenable any supremacist claims to cultural purity, for there is no one place/position that is unaffected. The subject is thus somewhere between one place and the other. Ironically it is this double scene, the very condition of cultural knowledge that cause alienation of the subject making their own lives dreamlike to them. “She was alone, afloat in the city and I was someone to confide in, or so it seemed. At times, her own life seemed like a dream.” (3)

While bombarding the narrative with multiple locations erases claims for inherent authenticity of the purity of cultures which frequently become arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures, it also produces in the lives of the these people as well as the narrative itself, many hybrid gaps. These gaps produce no relief, it is in these gaps that the birth of these subjects take place (and birth is always bloody, 230). Their position inscribed in that space of iteration where one culture constantly struggles with the other.

The multiple anchorage points in the lives of these people as also in the narrative itself serve to disinvest notions of uniformity and linearity on one hand and on the other offer construction of selfhood and identity through these cultural spaces that come across as counter cultures in a narrative that seems a counter narrative.

Embedded in the narrative and the lives that it speaks of is a colossal and chaotic politics of diaspora and paranoia, of migration and discrimination, of anxiety and appropriation, which is unthinkable without attention to those
subaltern and metonymic structures that the text dismantles. Hybridization of
culture and languages and narrative strategies releases the anguish associated with
vacillating boundaries – geographical/territorial, psychical/emotional, cultural,
economic, racial and even linguistic.

The text is a beautiful depiction of cultural complexity attendant upon the
modern society. It talks of experiences as diverse as literature (sundry references
to writers like P.B. Shelley and Mary Shelley, the epitaphs too are derived from
varied works of literature, one entire satellite chapter is called Poet’s café and
frequent allusions to Mahabharata), art (ample references to paintings like Ravi
Varma paintings to Draupadi’s stage antics), politics (an infinite number of
political issues are touched, the most prominent being Rajiv Gandhi
assassination, the Berlin wall episode the Babri Masjid- Ayodhya incident to the
resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism), media (right from CNN to doordarshan)
and even socio-political movements (Sakhi’s feminist engagements, human rights
conference etc.)

These symbols/signs on one hand suggest social specificity of their
production of meaning and on the other seen against the backdrop of transnational
cultural scenario, they make cultural understanding a complex form of
signification. Much of what the narrative wants to convey in terms of migrant
women’s search for selfhood can be understood in the light of these complex
forms of signification.

While the first text *Home* looked at a woman located in the neatly
structured grid of time and space, the second i.e. *Mother of 1084* looked at a
woman caught in between time and timelessness, this one goes a step further by
taking the woman into the realm of ‘beyond’. To dwell in the beyond is not just
existing outside well defined spaces but also being a part of incongruous time
frame, such that while the characters live in the present, they touch the past as
well as future on the hither side. “To keep things on an even keel, she kept
returning to her childhood home, a house with a red tiled roof and a sandy courtyard where the mulberry bloomed.”(40)

The non- synchronous time space of transnational exchange and exploitation has been embodied in the allegory of the subway also. It is this very flux of exchange that becomes the paysage moralisé of the world of global trade, of the gamut of cross- cultural relationships and of bridges called homes. It is through passages like these, hither and thither, as migrants, part of the massive economic and political diaspora that these women are blasted out of their historical specificity as also their past. Draupadi expresses a similar feeling when she says, “I meant roses. Sandhya, we’re women of color. Think of what Emerson, our household philosopher said. Be like the roses, cut off the past, frisk it, skin it, live in the present! You can’t keep cooking all wonderful eastern food.”(62)

There is thus another problem attendant upon these women apart from the many other universal oppressions that they are a victim of. For instance, once again, marriage in this text also is seen as an inevitable goal of women’s life just like it was in the case of Nisha( Manju Kapur’s Home). The following lines are evocative of the same, “What else could a woman’s life hold but marriage? And a good Marriage was one of the few ways to avert loneliness, the dreadful fate of women left to their own devices.”(25)

Reminiscent of the burning of Banwari Lal’s Daughter Sunita, is another reference to Sunita, some friend of Sandhya in India. “Her friend Sunita had burned. She had burned dreadfully in Hauz Khas, in her newly married home.”(33) The tragedy of women’s life is sharpened with the words” newly married home”, a home that ironically is supposed to be the Promised Land for these women. Even the art of domesticity through which women are bludgeoned into accepting hegemony spoken of in, Home, finds a mention in this text too. “So Sandhya Rosenblum had a dinner party. It was just the sort of thing she was raised to do. No servants, but she could shine at the chosen tasks.”(61)
While the woman with an American surname continues to suffer the Home way, there are also parts of narrative that call to mind Sujata of *Mother of 1084*. The parts of narrative that deal with her abortive relationship with Gautam make her suffering almost sujata like. “Gautam who was so gripped by the dream of social equality he spent all his weekends in the jungle somewhere north of Hyderabad, though he never spoke about it openly.”(15)

The suffering of these women, Sandhya and Gautam’s mother that derives from a cadaverous social system calls to mind Brati. Like him, Gautam too dies. “Her son’s body, wrapped in a prison blanket, was handed over to her. She crouched by his body on a pile of cold stones, and found she had no tears left. Her body was all dried out with its pain.” (21) The scars stay and mingle with other scars to lead Sandhya to that suicidal piece of rope.

Not just that, they are once again in this text too as also in the other victims of fate and destiny, born to suffer on the orders of the protector himself. That is something even Sandhya’s cousin Jay seems to wonder as he confronts his cousin in her American home. “If fire is lit in water, who can extinguish it? / If fear comes from the protector, who can protect us from that fear?”(28) These lines are orated by Jay as he looks at that miserable prey of destiny, Sandhya.

Thus women’s multi layered marginalization through patriarchy, class inequalities and imperialist ideologies that was identified in earlier chapters is relevant here too. Here their condition is however made worse as any attempt at finding a self is not a case of finding home between the paternal or marital (*Home*) and through social isolation or social conformity (*Mother of 1084*) but a complicated search away from nation home in a new home. “That this elusive sense remained with her even during consummation was something she had learnt to accept in her conscious mind and cope with, much as she coped with dislocation and her several homes.”(42)
Meena Alexander dwindles time and space to almost ludicrous proportions as she speaks about Sandhya, the object of new wave internationalism that far from assimilating, further disintegrates (the suspicious activities of Rashid’s friend Zahir and his dislike for non Muslims even as his home is in US) and that instead of Black Skin, White Mask (name of a book by Frantz Fanon) puts one into a Brown Skin, What Mask? (poem in the narrative) situation. “And here she was, the eldest granddaughter, sitting in an apartment in a great metropolis three continents away, living a life that had no ready pattern. And all that she at hand were scraps of space cobbled together, morsels of time, scooped up like burning flesh. The borders she had crossed had marked her very soul. Now she was a tattooed thing, thought Sandhya Rosenblum.”(74)

Even when Sandhya’s relationship with Stephen falls on hard times, she attributes its failure to differences in culture, nationality or perhaps skin color. “What if she could peel off her brown skin, dye her hair blonde, turn her body into a pale Caucasian thing, would it work better with Stephen?”(7)

This loss of selfhood and identity that Sandhya faces in her American home is something that her America born friend Draupadi also realizes. She says, “ Born in America, I must have seemed the epitome of newness, all she might one day be- leather jacket, Benetton sweater, short black hair, subtle eye shadow, the lot. She asked me simple questions, the what, where, who kind of thing, and in response rhythms flowed out of me.”(3)

Time and again, Sandhya tries to revel in this newness marked by the comingling of cultures. “The boundaries of the world seemed to shift and open, the dream of one world realized,” (32). Time and again she sees the fallacy of this statement. She makes desperate efforts of feeling at home but border crossings perpetually weaken her. “And in her head, for the sake of some clarity that might eventually help her piece her life together, she thought out all the places the plane had stopped at, as if she were a schoolchild counting an abacus, moving the shiny beads under her fingers.”(99)
Race or racism is another factor that accentuates the pain and suffering of these women. One of the chapters named ‘Stoning’ once again exposes the myth of assimilation. Race is to America what caste is to India. The text dexterously exposes the homelessness of the non-white people in a post-1965 predominantly white American nation. White though America is, yet not whitewashed with new global ethics.

This only serves to multiply the nostalgia as well as guilt for the “home country”. The tragedy of immigration being, that though people travel across borders, yet the borders remain with prejudices and power structures intact. Sandhya wonders to herself, “People should be able to change as naturally as that. What if crossing a border once changed color, shape even? And if this happened to every single human being in the world? What if the metamorphosis were built into the bodily system? Then who could one throw stones at? (207)

The lines reflect the utter hopelessness of their situation as the very search for identity seems to put identity in danger. It is equivalent to the erasing of a blackboard- a mental tabula rasa on which language and culture is already inscribed. She writes, “Sometimes I think I have to write myself into being. Write in order not to be erased.” (93)

What Meena Alexander also adds to her narrative to describe the typicality of the migrant woman’s oppression is the problem of the imperial tongue, i.e. English language and its role in hegemonising at a global level. Kristen Holt Peterson in an easy “A Feminist Approach to African Literature”, asks, “Which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western Cultural imperialism?” (252)

Not just Africa, but even Indian women share this experience, and it is this kind of hegemonic linguistic discourse in which a new species of women oppression takes place. In other words, the linguistic domination of English creates a new set of discomfort for Sandhya: proficiency in English enables
colonial men and women to be a rung above their subaltern counterparts in a situation that is already problematised by stringent class, sex and border stratification.

“Language carries culture, and culture carries particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world,” observes Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in Decolonizing The Mind: The Language of African Literature (16) “Stephen’s American English pleased her, accents most soothing to her ears, signaling an intactness she felt she could never aspire to, his language undeterred by border crossings into other, fraught territories.” (69) The lines are evocative of hegemonic discourse produced through language games.

Meena Alexander engages with language as a dominant reflective theme in the narrative. However one might wonder in this case if the subscription to English language (“bastard tongue” as termed by Salman Rushdie) in narrating the personal history of her heroine, Meena Alexander is the betrayal of the mother tongue that she means to eulogize. But then this is the only means through which she could give voice to the colonized in the colonizer’s homeland.

More importantly Sandhya’s complete closure in the imperial culture could be demonstrated only through this “Western filter” of the English language. Also, not to forget that after all, these novels make political moves by using personal history as inspiration, and as Spivak puts it in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” to “world the world through marginalized voices and narratives.” (243-44)

The female protagonist of this novel thus is a textual medium through which Meena Alexander’s own subaltern voice is being funneled. In fact Meena Alexander is not completely unaware of this problem as she documents her experience in The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience, writing:
It was a shock to me, a crisis in my writing life, if not in all the rest of what goes on under that phrase- my life, as if it were an elixir I possessed and might drink to the full or spit out as I chose- to realize that the machine of the colonial, technically postcolonial education I had received and, indeed, had fostered was cutting my words of from the very wellsprings of desire. Suddenly, I felt that even the memory would be impossible if I did not turn my attention to the violence very close at hand, attendant, in fact upon the procedures of my own writing.(4)

Using this language, Meena Alexander reflects life discourses and survival tactics for postcolonial women under the whip of the imperial tongue. The extent of the colonizer’s power is evident in the way Sandhya almost aspires to be locked in that culture, at least initially. The solemnization of her marriage to Stephen which she views as a means of transcending from the teeming pool of the subaltern subjects to the elite patriarchy of American Culture is an indication of the same. Stephen Murmurs to her as she enters the new world, “The gates of America are open wide...We will live here Sandy, we'll be happy. I promise you.”(7)

This new country, she views upon her arrival (which later turns out to be the Shock of Arrival) as an elitist drug, an antidote to the third world blues. But very soon she realizes that the antidote has side effects too. “This alchemy”, notes Braj B Kachru in The Post Colonial Studies Reader “does not only provide socials status, it also gives access to attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power and knowledge.”(295)

This alchemy is an elixir even for Sandhya to gain agency and visibility, to gain a voice. However, this visibility that she seeks is only elusive. For the sad reality is that as Frantz Fanon writes in The Wretched of the Earth:
The colonial world is a world divided into compartments...the originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come back to mask human realities. (32)

The realization of these divides even in a seemingly globalised world, change for Sandhya the experience of this geographical shift and her new homeland. Eventually one sees her vexed by her removal from India, marriage to a Jewish man leading eventually to a cultural schizophrenia and her attempted suicide.

Rosemary Marangoly George has observed in The Politics Of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction. “Writers in the immigrant genres always view the present in terms of its distance from the past and future, while never forgetting the experience of homelessness.”(171)

One sees Sandhya oscillate between the past homestead of Kerala and the present home in the immigrant nation. Jay her cousin is keenly perceptive of this split. He sees Sandhya and figures only “a shape there, dark, amorphous, a shadow of the past cast by the visible present. Where was the past, who did it belong to? He had no answers to the questions but felt that, lacking a past, the present would be sucked of its sense, made void.”(64)

So even though Alexander tries to create a space where characters try to find a voice in the havens of new nationality and homes, yet these seeming homes are not as promising. As noted by George Rosemary Marangoly in The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction:

For the immigrant genre, like the social phenomenon from which it takes its name, is born of a history of global colonialism and is therefore an undeniable part of post colonialism and of decolonizing discourses. (278)
Troubled as Sandhya is upon finding herself a foreigner in Stephen’s home/homeland, she seeks solace in this scenario by connecting with people who seem closer home. In fact her growing affection for Rashid as the narrative progresses is attributable largely to the fact that “Both he and Sandhya were foreigners in America, they would cradle each other. He would cast her afloat on the Nile and with her he would sail on the Ganges.” (76)

In fact what makes Sandhya’s search for home or safety of a sense of belonging typically different from the protagonists in the earlier narratives is that her cultural identity/home eventually emerges as so powerful that it erases her domestic home with her husband. When the two clash i.e. her cultural identity and her marital identity, the former emerges triumphant. Her relationship with Rashid is attributable to a cultural sameness that she feels with him. Alexander says, “of course Sandhya would be the authentic thing, as far as Rashid was concerned. True Third World.” (70).

However the dream doesn’t hold and in the midst of all her problems (estrangement with Stephen and the new culture, death of her father, disappearance of Rashid, increasing fixation on a home that was in India, sibling troubles with Nunu and a general atmosphere that is socially and politically volatile marked as it is by assassinations, riots in the streets, racial hostilities, resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism etc). Once again it is women who come to the rescue of women. Draupadi, her friend and Sakhi Karunakaran, her cousin are the people who once again try to rehabilitate her. However Meena Alexander tries to take a more liberal stance when she says, “it was important to expose her cousin to other lives, but it wasn’t just women, that was the thing. Men had to struggle, too.” (212)

Problems in the construction of identity are represented not only through Sandhya but also through Draupadi Dinkins. In her case the same is a continuum rather than a static reflection of US life. Identity instead of being seen as fixed becomes a dynamic construction that adjusts itself continually to the changes
experienced within and surrounding the self. Draupadi is Indian in physical attributes though she is American in her cultural attributes. The schism, she feels deeply and wishes to connect with India. Jay asks Draupadi

“But is this your past?”

“I want to make it up,” she argued.

“But why call the Mahabharata your heritage?” he quizzed her. “Why not the Iliad and Odyssey also?”

And for once she had no answer. The shreds of memory she got from her grandmother didn’t add up to the wild glory of the epic. All she had were whispers, shards of songs, torn phrases, and could they add up to a heritage? Still as a human being, she felt she had a right to anything out there. And what came from India was closer.”(52) This craving to relate to the Indian culture—this yearning, this “cultural cry” for an intimacy with the Indian culture characterizes the identity crisis experienced by all kinds of NRI women.

For Draupadi too, her American nationality doesn’t comprise her whole self for it doesn’t include her Indian ancestry this problem of Alexander’s character reflects Edward Said’s assertion in “Invention, Memory and Place “that “though a national identity always involves itself with the narratives of the host country, such identities are never undisputed or merely a matter of the neutral recital of facts.” (177)

In fact identity construction in Alexander’s narratives emerges from deep reservoirs of not just actual but imagined experiences also. Draupadi remarks, “Columbus struck America and called it India. It was India to him till the very end, when mad, bound raving to the bottom of his boat, he was shipped in chains to Spain…I stopped, shut my eyes, took in the applause, stepped back, dizzy as if India were all around.”(122)

Within the narrative, Draupadi thus embodies a discourse in ethnic American literature in which memory is the political gauge to the past and must be
reconsidered in the context of history and the act of forgetting, for she experiences amnesia of a country in which she wasn’t even born.

Paradoxically, the India imagined by Draupadi where the Mahabharata is hailed as a gilded epic is not the India experienced by Sandhya, who cannot even read her mother tongue Malayalam though she is prolific in English. The narrator tells us, “She had been brought up within the boundaries of a new India, where regional divisions were not considered overly important. She had fallen back on the Hindi of her school days and the English that the people of her class mixed in with whatever they spoke, the polyglot nature of their sentences a sign of breeding.” (69)

It is ironic that while the various varieties of English in America correspond with different corridors of power, in India, at least as the passage seems to indicate performs a unifying function. It is the common bond between the persons in Sandhya’s class whose polyglot sentences are held together by bits and pieces of English. It is the linguistic glue that connects several native tongues.

However the same once again may be seen as a sign of hegemonic discourse. But once again returning to America, it is precisely this transmutation of languages that among other things contributes to the suffering of Sandhya. “Then English alphabets, bright and jittery, started to spin in the wild incandescence of Malayalam. She opened her mouth wide so could swallow the hybrid syllables spinning.” (102)

These trials send Sandhya to the edge of her mind where closes her eyes and melts into her thoughts while voices in “Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and English call out to her.” (226). For Sandhya this is a side effect of what Deepika Bahri calls the “the promise of America... the promise of a fresh start in a new world.” (51)
Sandhya’s feeling of homelessness delves to a deeper level than that experienced by Draupadi, who retains a sort of American identity comfort, never having directly experienced life in India, only the same exotic and spiritualized perceptions of most white westerners. Though both women seem to be rendered homeless by the hegemonic discourses already referred to, yet the narrative creates grounds for vast differences between the younger, beatnik Draupadi and her older immigrant counterpart, Sandhya.

In trying to convey the isolation of the self and homeland that her characters experience, Alexander writes, “She felt nothing of the guilt so many of her counterparts bore in switching passports, as if they were mortgaging one world for another. She was Indian; she would live and die that way. No one could change her skin, or say to her: your parents are not buried in the churchyard in Tiruvella; your in-laws never lived in Nagercoil. Nor have you ever spoken Malayalam.” (132) The female postcolonial subjects thus face a geographical, emotional and spiritual displacement that results in an allegiance to the Indian ancestral homeland.

Interestingly even in this narrative, it is women who show solidarity to each other. The Draupadi- Sandhya- Sakhi bond is an evidence of the same. Strangely, men are either absent from their world of suffering or that their understanding of the trouble of these women is inadequate. Sandhya wonders to herself in her moments of agony, “this was the world Stephen had brought her to, but he himself was oddly absent from it, and Sandhya felt that there was no way, she could draw on his experience to help her live her life.” (39)

The situation worsens and she realizes “she couldn’t even speak openly with him, locked as she was into a world she felt she had not chosen.” (38) From then on, one sees that even though Stephen loves Sandhya but his “statements did nothing for her, she was worn out from trying to live two lives, and so clung to her father’s illness, letting it draw all the buried pain out of her soul.”(96)
The distancing from Stephen and the inability to feel at home eventually leads Sandhya to a fixation on the home she left behind. Even as she returns to America after a trip to India, she finds it difficult to accept it as a home. Sakhi, when she spots a letter written by Sandhya wonders about the same, “its lovely to think of you back home...Sakhi’s gaze took in the rough ending of the sentence she had penned. The word “home” scrawled as if the hand hadn’t quite wanted to acknowledge it. “Home, where was that after all? Was Tiruvella, where her parents lived “home” to Sandhya? Or New York? Sandhya had married Stephen and crossed a border with him. Surely marriage meant setting up a new home?”(127)

There is an additional problem in the case of Sandhya. She is not one of those hundreds of women who marry Indian men staying in America. What makes her lot even more vulnerable and her feeling of homelessness more profound is that the man she has married is not an Indian. Alexander remarks, “Now if only Sandhya had married an Indian, living in America would be easier on her; Ravi truly believed this. In her present state it was as if she were cast out by the community. Where could she make a place for herself?”(133)

While there are many instances in the narrative construction (structure) of this novel that make it counter hegemonic, there are many in its plot too that spell defiance and contribute to its anti foundational flavor. First among these is the portrayal of such female protagonists who in Mahasweta’s words are women “who roamed from one man to another, from one glass of liquor to another.”(110)

Sandhya easily falls into this category of women, yet the author presents her as a sympathetic adulteress. Justification for the same is quickly secured when Sandhya’s female confidante remarks, “you and I have to fight against that. There is no reason why women should pay this terrible price of having been born, for feeling passion, for bearing life.”(210)
Yet again, it is not just the justifiable desecration of the marital bond that Alexander presents, but even the sacred role of a mother, particularly when seen in the Indian context is presented with many ‘fault lines’ running through. Alexander remarks, almost nonchalantly, “Sometimes her child seemed part of a life she no longer needed. And it was hard for Sandhya to refigure herself as the one who must coax and cuddle, wash and dry and heal.” (142). But validation for the same is promptly sought. “How could a woman do this? As if a woman’s hands are any different from a man’s, her hate, her despair, the passion risen in her brain”. (164)

Even the narrative structure of the novel is equally counter canonical. It reinforces the mood of chaos, randomness and crime rampant in the new order. Much like the American “free enterprise” spoken of by Alexander, the narrative itself is like one. The narrative comprises of six chapters: Sitting, Stirring, Going, Stoning, Turning and Staying respectively. Simply putting these six chapter heads next to each other produces in itself a story about an Indian woman sitting “on the wooden bench at the edge of Central Park” (5), her stirring as she realizes that she “needed to meet others” (49), her going back to India as she knew “her soul was in Tiruvella” (96), her stoning followed by a “dark root of rage” (141) in her life, her turning to death as she realizes she “wanted to get back to myself” (141) and finally her attempt at staying with life as she finds “the load of her womanhood, of accumulated life, breaking free into an inconceivable sweetness.” (219)

But that’s not all. Set before each chapter is a prefatory chapter or perhaps satellite chapters. There are seven of them, each having a title (Overture: Monsoon Flood, Subway Song, Another India, Poet’s Café, Paradise House, Black Water and Rope Mark) that is followed by the name of the narrator in the brackets (i.e. Draupadi) and six of these satellite chapters begins with an epitaph. All these six epitaphs have been taken from works of writers (Kalidasa, Meghadootam; Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man; Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus; Jean Genet, The
Balcony: William Blake, Jerusalem: Franz Kafka, The Bridge) spread in time as well as space.

Even when the narrative ends, it does not. That is to say despite a seeming narrative closure, there are four poems by Arjun Sankarmangalam. (Brown Skin, white Mask?, Against Elegy, River and Bridge, Art of Pariahs) The poems have been referred to in the narrative itself and in the narrative are written supposedly by Jay, one of the chief characters.

Such narrative strategies go a long way in challenging the hegemonic narrative codes that presuppose deterministic openings and closures. As the narrative deals with the lives of disadvantaged immigrant women in America, this tool of breaking up the narrative into widely scattered contingencies serves the purpose of questioning social and cultural codes. Reconstitution of the discourse of cultural difference requires not just a redefinition of cultural contents and symbols but also a radical revision of the temporality in which emergent histories may be written.

It is only the re-articulation of 'signs' through which new cultural identities can be inscribed. The biggest example of the same is the narrator of the novel, Draupadi Dinkins. Though her presence immediately calls to mind, the Draupadi of the Mahabharata, yet given her hybrid origins, her four generations having traced four different continents and her extremely Americanised life, the thought almost sounds revolting.

In fact she herself voices the same feeling as she says, “Why they named me Draupadi I cannot tell. What did they know of the goddess born of fire, wife of the five Pandavas, she who rode an elephant, was humiliated in the court of kings, survived a battlefield, lived out her life in exile, then raced into the wind, atop a tiger, a lotus blossom in one hand, a sword in the other? (88)

At the outset, therefore it may seem that given the historical specificity of people and traditions and the embedded myths of cultural particularity cannot be
easily referenced. The signifier does not correspond with the sign. However it is primarily through this grand narrative of Draupadi belying the surface narrative of Sandhya that Meena Alexander is able to unsettle the ethics of exclusionist frameworks.

In fact Alexander’s assignment of central position not to one but two female protagonists once again is a counter canonical and thus a counter hegemonic move. Within the narrative canvas, Sandhya represents the female postcolonial immigrant straddled between two homelands, Draupadi her friend, contrasts by being constructed as an intense, street smart woman born in the United States who wonders what kind of female power it takes Sandhya to wrap six yards of sari around herself.

Here, as suggested in Deepa Mehta’s critically acclaimed movie Fire, the ample references to sari are as an allegorical body wrap that confines the Indian woman to traditional cultural and gender roles. However, in the context of this narrative, it is precisely this body wrap that creates the sensuality of Sandhya.

Sandhya and Draupadi seem like foils but are allegorically similar. Draupadi, not a first generation immigrant, embodies the sense of second generation ethnic and therefore more at ‘home’ in America unlike Sandhya, who is more symbolic of her nation, her former homeland. But one sees in Draupadi, too a need to connect to India, though she is US born. The following lines are suggestive of the same. “Am I Indian at all? Draupadi asked the astonished shopkeeper, then started laughing. “Tell me who am I?”(57).

It is precisely the use of such counter-hegemonic strategies or indeterminism that Meena Alexander has built into the narrative, that creates conflictual yet productive space in which the arbitrariness of the signs of cultural signification emerges within the regulated boundaries of social discourse.

Even in respect to the narrative code that is followed in the production of this narrative, it is the symbolic code that dominates the hermeneutic code and the
proairetic code. Images, metaphors and visions contribute in making various narrative units symbolic. While Empire State Building, Subways and Glass Mirrors are important symbols of the American culture while incense trees, long grasses and snail shells are symbols used in the context of Indian culture. The entire narrative is punctuated with dreams. Every character in the narrative dreams. There are dreams, more dreams and still more dreams. “Her dreams gave her little respite. They took her to another country.”(9)

The experience of social marginality even as it emerges in a non-canonical narrative form helps one in confronting culture outside objects d’art or beyond the canonization of the idea of fictional aesthetics. Meena Alexander’s narrative thus helps to engage with culture, as opposed to its settled perception, as an uneven and at times, incomplete production that is composed of incommensurable practices. The narrative by creating symbolic textuality, gives a promise of selfhood despite speaking of alienation and solitude.

So much so, where most immigrant fiction can be compartmentalized as either literature of protest of literature of celebration, one sees in Manhattan Music traces of both.

While on one hand, the narrative is replete with images of America standing proud (“New York of course, was the perfect location in which to put such a narrative together. And mightn’t one argue that varied languages altered the structure of consciousness, made one better equipped for life in a world of multiple anchorages such as New York presented”,68) and on the other, America is also stripped naked there, in all its reality of exploitation with nothing to offer. (“we are all migrants”, she added softly, “from the past. I guess that’s the big thing.” 211)

All these structural devices take one into the realm of the beyond. It is neither celebratory, nor denunciatory, neither happy nor sad, neither totally prosaic nor totally poetical, neither very sufficiently historic nor devoid of it. It is
much like the name of its protagonist Sandhya. “In Sanskrit the name signified those threshold hours, before the sun rose or set, fragile zones of change before the clashing absolutes of light and dark too hold,”(227)

It is these fragile zones that Meena Alexander seeks to expose in the construction of the identity of these exiled women. The same she accomplishes by uses narrative construction that is completely symbolical. The poetic flashes of Alexander’s language, its mythical quality and a myriad symbols that she has employed render to the realistic seeming narrative an oddly uplifting flavor. Everything is a symbol. The hybrid names of the characters are symbols, Manhattan is a symbol, the subway is a symbol, the stones that Sakhi usually kicks are a symbol, the paintings are a symbol and the snail shells are a symbol.

In fact the beauty of the narrative lies in the fact that what each symbol signifies one cannot say. Most of them seem to be invested with multiple meanings. The same is true of characters too. Alexander seems far too aware of the dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities that results from calcification of meanings into essentialist categories. So much so even when she refers to an epic from the past, she doesn’t seem to be recommending that ‘roots’ be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or homogenizing the history of the present.

In fact a careful reading will reveal that when she speaks of the glorious epic, it is not meant to be a critique of the modern times but of its own reading. Once again it serves to show the incoherence between the sign (epic) and its signification. Alexander remarks, “Why could she not love two men? The story of Draupadi of the Mahabharata, who had five husbands and loved them all, came back to her.”(181). But the author is quick at suggesting the distinctiveness of context and therefore quickly iterates, “the Pandavas seemed too large, too clumsy in their ancient lineaments to come any closer, the Draupadi they shared too lean a spirit to speak to her. Who knew what her real feelings had been confronted with all five of them?”(181)
The entire narrative is marked with such negating activities. It is precisely these negating activities that establish a bridge: where presencing begins because of absence of fixities. It is this that enables her to capture something of the estranging sense of the dislocation of the home and the world- the “unhomeliness” (term used by Homi. K.Bhabha )- that is the condition of cross cultural residents. “ Sandhya could not tell how long she wandered in the park in the mid morning light. Stumbling through the long grasses, her face streaked with dirt, it struck her that a few more weeks and she might be like that old man in tattered silks, only no saxophone. A woman with nothing in her hands.”(227)

Meena Alexander enters the house of fiction and art in order to invade, alarm, divide and dispossess, by doing so she also demonstrates the contemporary compulsion to move beyond. Sujata’s double life affirms the borders of culture’s insurgent and interstitial existence, located as she is between the unhomeliness of migrancy and the baroque belonging of the metropolitan, New York.

Changing the signification of historical and temporal meaning and even investing signs with multiple meanings creates a “Third space of enunciation” which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process. It destroys the notion of fiction as a home of representation in which knowledge is revealed as an integrated, open expanding code. It is only when we understand that all cultural statements are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why archival claims to the purity of fiction as a genre becomes untenable in this narrative.

Hybridity has thus been built into the very writing of the narrative. For most parts, it comes across as poetical prose. Not just that, intervention is sought from the dramatic genre too. At least two of the epitaphs are from plays. One of these is from a play The Balcony by Jean Genet, which deals with the construction of a brothel, its social bearings as well as its cultural determinants. Meena Alexander herself has remarked about her prose style in an interview to Ruth Maxey printed in The Kenyon Review. She says, “I obviously, write a certain kind
of prose that is in its texture, closer to the sort of little knots an embroiderer uses. The way it works is through an image rather than through emplotment.”

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What is important here is not the line extracted from the play, but that the play deals with the moral debris and the violence of a hypocritical society, with the groups of people who have been marginalized. It propounds Foucault’s understanding of the prison – brothel connection as both harbor people who have been ejected out of the social space. Alexander’s own narrative is not too different in its suggestion of these immigrants whose flights of freedom ironically lock them into cultural prisons.

Not just that the epitaph from *Titus Andronicus* is significant as the play is a violent and bloody spectacle. Samuel Johnson wrote of the play, “the barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience.” The play thus however unbelievable it may be, is a running hyperbole that compliments perfectly well the real world that Meena Alexander has created. If Titus depicts demonic acts like rape, riots, poison, stab, shoot, lynch, torture, cut off heads, wars then the twenty first century Manhattan is no different.

There are wars being waged in all parts of the world. Alexander remarks, “a bunker was bombed. I saw a girl, hair in flames, carried out on a stretcher. The flesh of her mother clung to her. Her face showed bones that came up through flesh, fusing together. I saw the burning door they bore her through.”(163)

A general atmosphere of violence looms over the narrative. Not just the images and descriptions but even the linguistic collocations are bizarre and awkward. They call to mind Trin Minh-Ha’s lines about women writings in *Women, Native, Other*:
And we are in terror of letting ourselves be engulfed by the depths of muteness. This is why we keep on doing violence to words: to tame and cook the wild raw, to adopt the vertiginously infinite. (119)

Amidst all this it is the plight of women that is the immediate concern here. Within the narrative itself, one sees at least three different kinds of women. There is first and foremost, Sandhya, who despite her attempts at self assertion is strangely apologetic about everything. “There was always something a little fragile about Sandhya and a sense of shame, as if she were fit to be punished”. (133). In stark contrast is Draupadi, who tells her lover, married however for thirty years to Laura, “Rinaldo, I am going to have this child” (168). There is also Sakhi Karunakaran who represents the resilient and practical immigrant “who had very little money at the start” but “learnt to drive on the highways” for she realized “that human beings learnt how to survive, and in surviving, they changed. The thought did not hurt her.” (132)

Once again, there is no homogeneity in the women that Alexander presents. That the experience of immigration connects them to India is the only commonality. In rest of the attributes however there is a great amount of diversity. In doing so, Alexander it seems is offering a new vision of the Indian women. Marginalized though they are, yet each of them suffer in a manner that is peculiar.

To that Alexander has added the gloss of historical/mythical legend of Draupadi which puts things in an altogether new light. Different though their search for identity may be, yet things come full circle with the equation of Draupadi’s( of Mahabharata) broader quests to that of these dislocated women living in exile. The connection is evident from these lines. “After all, each of these women crossed the black waters. And the mythic Draupadi as we know spent much of her life in exile.”(218)
Not just that the entire history of Indian women and its grievous misunderstanding seems to be seen in a new light with these lines, “why could she (Sandhya) not love two men? The story of the Draupadi of the Mahabharata, who had five husbands and loved them all, came back to her.” (181)

However the decontextualization of this historical fact ignores taking into cognizance the fact that Draupadi did not choose to have more than one husband. She is simply implicated in the system of exchange. Remarks A.R. Gupta in Women in Hindu Society:

They (Pandavas) were all aflame with love towards the wonderfully fair one, and so Yudhishthira deemed that they would rather possess her together than to come to strife on account of her. (38)

In a narrative rampant with pre marital and post marital relationships, there are sundry references to the desires of flesh. The entire existence is conceived in grossly physical and bodily terms. There is no attempt whatsoever at negating the importance of physical gratification in contributing to women’s search for identity. However the same is referred to not just as a symbol of desire but even of one’s racial identity and one’s culture. The author expresses the same by saying, “She (Sandhya) shivered a little thinking of flesh: flesh in sneakers, flesh that reached out, flesh caressed, flesh burnt, flesh blown into tiny bloody particles.” (111)

One sees in the text a curious and colossal mix of the Occidental and Indian concepts in terms of the author’s stance about sex morality, guilt and sin. The absence of any clear cut narrative standpoint one’s again defies definiteness. There are faint references to social disapprobation of unrestrained adultery. That the ideal of chastity is guarded is evident at least in the manner narrative ends. “Hearing Stephen’s voice again she turned, her hair all wet, so
thankful, he was still with her. With her palm she touched his cheek as if for the first time.”(221)

The return to the husband and the family after temporary wanderings makes it sufficiently clear that while adultery may be indulged in, but more as an escape from the bitter realities of life than as a conviction. The consciousness of guilt is implicit.

While Meena Alexander thus resorts to the construction of women’s selfhood amidst a symbolical, ambiguous and indeterminate narrative, the same also serves to disrupt the western discourse of modernity and to dislodge the western white male from his position of signifying and subjectifying category of culture.

As an alternative strategy, the white male is constructed by the gaze of brown skinned Chandu. “Watching her walk out of the room, Chandu thought how finely she was shaped, and how she was wasted on that American chap whose name he quite inadvertently kept forgetting.”(116)

This myth of progress has already been exploded by the likes of Frantz Fanon, Homi. K. Bhabha and Foucault. Not unlike what they suggest, i.e. movement of the signifier away to the position of the signified and reconstitution of the given categories in the framework of culture, Alexander too accomplishes the same.

A narrative though it is about New York and life in that city, yet given the narrative vision and horizon, it is New York itself that becomes the outsider and a remote, far fetched Tiruvella seems the real home of the narrative. No wonder when vision and horizon is incommensurate with cultural and social constructs, it leads to the revision of subjectivity.

Such a split in the identity of these subjects brings one to an understanding of how the self gets defined. In a similar shift of stances, these women, the
subjects take the position of the signifier and constitute the identity of men. Through this act of seeing and knowing them (Stephen, Gautam and Rashid), they not only constitute them from a different perspective but also form identity for themselves in relation to that ‘Other’. The reversal of this category is the beginning of a search for new possibilities- a little chink from where the expanse of the beyond will open up.

Memory or dreams form another structure through which the identity of these women is created. The only escape from the constraints of their own being happens through dreams. Particularly for Sandhya, it is precisely these dreams that take her closer to her real self. “What was it? Why was she so anxious? Was it because of the dreams that poured into her night after night so she felt like an unborn thing, a puppet with no play to be in?”(9)

The entire Gautam- Sandhya relationship as also her reflections of her childhood home are constructed entirely through these dream symbols. Once again the construction of Sandhya’s identity and home through dreams rendering the American reality to be a dream reveals the reversal of signification.

Another important and empowering reversal takes place in the arena of religion. The novel is clearly set against the backdrop of religion and politics. Ordinarily religion is the manifestation of a man’s desire for power and a myth that sustains patriarchy. It limits, restrains and restrains women. But the frequent references to a “woman” who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi or to the “women” who are leading the Islamic movements to “wanting to wipe out people who are different” (153) again turns the narrative against the popular tide.

Yet another religious dictate would expect women to hide themselves. Hiding the physicality is essential to their being as they are visible only physically. But the same is also grandly defied in the narrative. All these women indulge in and outside marriage. The verbal descriptions of female physicality are candid and explicit. Right from the episode of Draupadi’s abortion to the many
intimate encounters of Sandhya with Rashid, women’s sexuality has been depicted with an unusual frankness. Release is thus offered even though ephemerally.

Thus far from being a Grand Narrative settled at or near the center of personal experience, the self materializes in myriad nook and crannies in this novel. It reflects at one point one sense of who these women are in one site and then turns a second option for personal definition in another one.

The narrative is complex and socially dispersed and lost in a wilderness of mirrors that reflect one image of the self at one moment and then some other. Literally too, the image of these mirrors and looking glasses is generously sprinkled in the narrative. “The outside of the bar was covered with brilliant mirrors and for a moment she (Sandhya)was forced to shut her eyes from the glare. Then she caught site of the three of them, husband, wife and child: Stephen with his kind, bewildered mouth, his soft hair rumpled, and next to him her own bodily self, eyes disappearing in all that light. The child swung by her dimpled arms between the two parents, a weight, a precious burden.” (40)

Such narrative strategies produce something like the multiphrenia that Kenneth Gergen describes in The Saturated Self. In multiphrenia an internal, grandly decisive beacon devolves into a thousand possible I’s and me’s, whose local articulations scatter us every which way. “She heard her sister Nunu cry out in the Sanskrit her tutor forced on her…the singsong of recitation. She heard Arabic from the lyrics Rashid leaned from his mother, a burial song, a woman with a swanlike neck, exiled in life, returned to her native soil in death. She heard voices from the streets of Bosnia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, strange countries bruised as plums might be in a gunny sack.” (193) Buffeted around the self construction terrain by diversity in the narrative, as Holstein and Gubrium express in The Self We live By “the self’s compass spins wildly out of control, ostensibly losing its ability to pick and chose its own course.” (222)

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Sandhya experiences multiphrenia in even the most commonplace settings. This spirals into the full blown state of a disease where the technologies of self construction expand exponentially, in effect overwhelming the subject with endless possibilities for identity: American, Indian or Indian-American. Sadly this seeming overpopulation of choices is only elusive. The reality of her life is closer to the Ravi Varma painting Sandhya observes rather intently. “A caged lady whose hair dripped in black. Her sari painted in thick dabs of white, shimmered like river water. In her right hand the painted lady held a knife.”(107)

An important question that emerges here is whether Meena Alexander by writing such a narrative is trying to multiply and hybridize identities. The lines at the end of the narrative where Draupadi acknowledges the same are significant in this regard. She remarks, “We each have to be many women...After all how many lives did the Mahabharata lady have?”(222) This world of immigrant/third world/postmodern women is a frenzied world of the polysemic self, a self refracted but not displaced by all manner of signification.

As a result the narrative has been exploded with images and representations of these women and their identity. The images used to convey that have been as diverse as the stones/pebbles in the street to empty snail shells. “one or two shells, missed by Bhaskaran in his clean up, still lay on the gravel, pale inner passages transparent with moonlight, cavities all emptied out. She wanted to say something to Stephen about the snails, but he sounded so far away, bent upon maintaining his poise in that other world.”(105)

The same serves to knock a sense of stable home/self off center but not totally eliminating identity as a primary category of experience. However some portions of the narrative are so hysterical that they put into doubt the reality of self and depict the real world as if it were one of the myths of Western rationality. It is denied to everybody, not just the women but even the men, to Stephen the insider, to Rashid the outsider, even to Jay who is on the social fast track.
A more reasonable manner in which to decipher the same, one can turn to these lines of the narrative where Sandhya despite her exile is able to find her place. “There was a place for her. Slowly she opened her fists, releasing her fingers, letting the half light pour through her, letting her hands lie quite by her side. There was a place for her here, though what it might be she could never have spelled out. And she, who had never trusted words very much, knew she would live out her life in America.”(228)

The vision of the woman’s self thus offered at the end of the narrative is not unlike what Lyotard explains in *The Postmodern Condition*. He says:

> A modern self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. One is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse. (15)

Having said that the narrative thus insinuates at a scope for reclamation of the self in a very turbulent immigrant scenario, where the woman is exiled by an added dislocation of home, it is pertinent to mention here that the narrative seems to exhibit itself as, given all the narrative strategies employed as Roland Barthes says in *S/Z* a “galaxy of signifiers.”(5)

The result being that the text has extended itself to an open horizon of readings on which many meanings can be inscribed not unlike the open world it speaks of where the women speak not from one home with one identity but many. After all, as Barthes says in *Image, Music, Text* “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (148). Not unlike that what is ultimately important is the final shedding of un homeliness to a state of being at home even in exile. No wonder at the end of the narrative, Alexander remarks, “the word exile moved in her (Sandhya) and she wondered what it meant, then cast it aside.”(218)
Similarly Alexander’s incorporation of poems by Arjun Sankarmangalam develops “intertextuality” (Kristeva) in the text, the leading idea of which was that texts drew their meanings from other texts, in an unending interplay of readings and interpretations. The same contributes to the notion that a centered self— even a multifaceted and presented self has been displaced, if not disparaged. The self now rests in narratives derived from the related regions and concerns of the contemporary identity landscape. From one region or the site to other, it’s apparent that what / where we are has no final resting place. Yet her narrative accomplishes the very important task of providing a poetic cartography of the historical and political location of the third world women.

While she maps a world traversed with intersecting divisions of gender (“they said when we were girls we would get stoned in the marketplace if we went out without escort, or showed our bare arms”, 135), color (body half- brown, half-white, half- green, half- ochre, whatever was not the norm, skin refusing to work a change”,207), religion (“I saw blood, the Muslim woman who lived in Bangle-Sellers Lane behind Charminar. After the Rath Yatra they took her out and raped her in the graveyard”, 195) nation (two stones struck. “Paki,” they yelled, then, “Hindu,” one after the other, as if the words were interchangeable, 135)

She also shows in this world trace of resistance and revolution in daily life and as organized liberation movements. And it is precisely these contours that define the complex ground for the emergence and consolidation of third world women’s identity. Alexander remarks, “every time she (Sakhi) heard the word Indian, she started up. Now she was threatening to give up the accounting business that had helped them to set up, and devote herself to antiracist, antisexist work, as she puts it. Not that he had any aversion to it, but why bring it all together like that? All these oppositions. Resistances.”(136)

But a close reading of the narrative also reveals the significance of such movements for women. The same can be expressed in the words of WING(
Women, Immigration and Nationality Group) who describe the significance of such issues thus:

The intermeshed racism and sexism of immigration legislation effects black and immigrant women in all areas of their lives. As wives, they are assumed to live wherever their husbands reside and to be dependent on them. As mothers, particularly single mothers, they have difficulty in bringing their children to join them. As workers, they are forced to leave their children behind. (148)

Meena Alexander therefore carefully uses materials to foreground women not just as women because they are females but to trace their relationship with race, nation and class too. That is what allows her to even expose those systems of domination that also contribute to the construction of the identity of these women. Hellen Callaway has remarked in *Gender, Culture and Empire*:

The case might be argued that imperial culture exercised its power not so much through physical coercion, which was relatively minimal though always a threat, but through its cognitive dimension: its comprehensive, symbolic order which constituted permissible thinking and action and prevented other worlds from emerging.(141)

Accordingly Alexander reveals through this narrative insights into the history of slavery and bonded labor of people of color in the United States which indicates a clear pattern of radicalization tied to the ideological and economic exigencies of the state. The part of the narrative that deals with the antecedents of Draupadi Dinkins are indicative of the same, “Then, too, she was the great granddaughter of a woman who had come as a bonded laborer to Trinidad, worked in the cane fields in the sweltering heat. That was her bond with India. India owed her and she would draw what she wished from that world, rework the language,
pack it with lore, Syncretism was part of her being and it might work for her, overcoming the barriers she felt she had faced since childhood.”(52)

Yet another factor that shapes the selfhood and identity of these women that Meena Alexander has briefly touched is that of class inequalities. After all this location of massive third world populations in countries like United States is an indicator of economic inequalities across the globe that precipitate this dislocation/relocation.

A pitiable picture of the same has been created by Meena Alexander in the following words, “during the night, a group of skinheads had tossed bottles in his (Himanshu)soda shop, heaped garbage and spent condoms by the window, and Himanshu was forced to pick up the tawdry bits in his bare hands and to clean out his shop front. Draupadi saw the helpless rage in her father’s eyes as Maya, her mother, bandaged his hands.”(53)

The values, power and meaning attached to being either a consumer or a producer therefore is invariably connected to where and who we happen to be in an unequal global system. The same leads to the exploitation of men from the less privileged parts of the globe and renders women invisible. The psychic and social disenfranchisement and impoverishment of women continues.

These lines reveal once again, several layers of marginalization women suffer, including class exploitation. “She broke down as she came to her own life, the sweatshop she worked in, a violent husband, a difficult pregnancy, her flight into the night air, down the cold streets and the figure who kept chasing her.”(212)

Does that mean that the narrative charged as it is, with multiple depictions of exploitation and suffering for these homeless women, there is no hope for rehabilitation of self/ identity? Indeed not. As has already been shown earlier in the chapter too, the narrative is at least faintly suggestive of the dawning of a renewed politics of hope and solidarity. There is not one but many junctures in the narrative where it expresses this hope for seeking solidarity with this world/new
home. The images of a desire for union are ample. “I shall push them through South Street Seaport for the Diwali celebrations. Marry the two earths. Make myself whole.”(175) Or for that matter the picture of Pirbhakaran, “a Tamilian who operated out of Texas and went by the name of Pirbhakaran, selling the gospel in honeyed notes to black and white and Indian alike.”

Whether or not the exile ends, for a kind of prophecy had been made in the beginning (“Her dance will go on till the end of exile”) there is some inkling of redemption if not the ending of exile in the last line of the narrative. “Sandhya Rosenblum walked back into the waiting city.”(228)

In fact following this analysis I think, Meena Alexander is claiming, via a complex and subtle argument that the Western world is not only different but also prejudiced and wrong. However by doing so she is assuming ultimately a possibility of commonality with it. She is not content to leave this world as a situated knowledge. There is a claim to a more universal home. These lines of the narrative are not only significant but promising in the same regard, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.”(177)