

Rebirth of Self and Identity: An Analysis of Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how Meena Alexander explores the prospect of outgrowing the sense of rootlessness of Asian immigrants in America in Manhattan Music. According to her it is managed by vocational and social engagements, and bonding with fellow expatriates. Alienation, search for identity and emotional insecurity of immigrants have hitherto been the dominant themes of diasporic literature. However, in the context of globalisation the concept of 'home' as a giver of emotional security cries for a redefinition. Meena Alexander's Manhattan Music analyses the impact of transplantation from natal to post-marital space in the lives of women characters. Sandhya Rosenblum, Draupadi Dinkins, Sakhi and a few others despite the differences in their upbringing, experience the trauma of dislocation at first, but outgrow the same. Sandhya wrestles between her conflicting roles, a mother in New York and a daughter revisiting India, and in neither does she feel at home. But after her recovery from the shock of suicide, she escapes from racial thinking. It constitutes a rebirth of self for her. Similarly, Draupadi, the alter-ego of Sandhya, comes to realise being an American is only a part of her Self. Meena Alexander's central vision in all her writings is the need of the immigrants for adapting themselves to the changed environment to find meaning in their lives. In Manhattan Music, the writer emphasises this idea by portraying Sandhya's inner conflict in her adopted country at first and later her awakening to the truth that we all have several "homes" or as Homi Bhabha suggests we have to "desire for social solidarity: I am looking for the join...I want to join...I want to join." (Bhabha 1994, p.18)

Keywords: dislocation; transplantation; rootlessness; alienation; bonding; solidarity; rebirth of self; identity

INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the complex multicultural heritage depicted in Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* and analyses the impact of the transplantation from natal to post-marital space in the lives of women characters of Indian origin. As it happens with many other diasporic writers, Alexander too records the sense of rootlessness, alienation, emotional insecurity and crisis of identity, her characters suffer. But they soon outgrow them through some traumatic experience in the new environment. Sandhya, for instance, feels her situation unbearable and attempts suicide, but when she recovers from its shock she experiences the rebirth of her self. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*, to be "unhomed is not to be homeless" (Bhabha 1994, p.9). When the realisation of being unhomed strikes one, "the world shrinks and then expands enormously. The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (Bhabha 1994, p. 11). In the case of Alexander however there is of course no political implication as with the case of Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison.

The term ‘diaspora’ originally referred to the people living outside their homeland and historically it suggested the settling of Jews in different parts of the world. However, now the term is used “to signify a more general sense of displacement, as well as a challenge to the limits of existing boundaries” (Mitchell 1997, p. 259). Among settlers in the USA and European countries, the Indian diaspora constitutes a significant number and is 26 million strong (Bharucha 2014). The Indian diaspora has a long history that began in the colonial era in the 1830s, when Indians were taken as indentured labour to different British colonies across the world. In the postcolonial period, Indians went as skilled, semi-skilled labour and professionals to countries such as the UK, Canada and other West Asian countries. In the 1970s, the USA, Europe and Australia marked the destination of their higher studies and many did not return to India. By the 1990s, because of the new global economic order, diasporic Indians had become a visible presence with countries of their settlement. India is a country of multiple languages, religious practices, customs and conventions.

The link that the diverse Indian diasporics have to their homeland is connected to the manner in which they identify themselves. Their identities are completely hybrid, depending on the tenure of their existence in the alien soil. There are not only Non-Resident Indians but transnationals who have acquired their nationality by their long stay and by birth in the alien country. This has seen inter-generational conflicts among them. What Bharucha observes on Gurinder Chadha’s cinematic presentations of the Diaspora in *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend it Like Beckham* is explicatory of today’s situation. She observes

Indian values, family life and cuisine, the elements that constituted the right approach to life for the older generation of diasporics does not make much sense to the younger generations. The girls date white and even black boys and display double lives – one at home in salwar kameez and one outside the home in jeans and T-shirts”.
(Bharucha 2014, P. 11)

What sounds as ambivalent in the statement on the diasporic Indian life, however, is only half the truth. Most of them undergo some extremely distressing experience, at some stage in their life, which sets in motion self-reflection, capable of guiding them to resolve the self-contradictions and arrive at a sense of solidarity which may be called a rebirth of self and identity. Though ‘rebirth’ is predominantly an Indian concept as part of the cyclic process of existence - Birth - Death - Rebirth, it yields easily to a more general application of the cyclic process of our life on earth passing from ignorance through experience to an awareness of the purpose of existence; such an interpretation of life is also available in the notion of ‘initiation’ and ‘epiphany’ in Christian thinking and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – ‘self-esteem’ and ‘self-actualisation’.

The individual human being is often completely immersed in activities of earning a living. This economic ideal is behind diasporic experience. It makes many an Indian diaspora materialistic, to the exclusion of practising the higher values of life. However, quite a few Indian diaspora undergo a shocking experience in this rat race which serves for individuals as a rite of passage and promotes knowledge of the self and sets them on a quest of self-actualisation. Applied to the Indian diaspora, they stand in prospect of shedding their exploitation of the alien land for self-aggrandisement and developing a sense of genuine belonging to the country of their adoption; a home outside home.

It has been widely thought that the geographical relocation of immigrants ultimately leads to a sense of exile when they could not integrate themselves with the culture of the adopted country. A member of the diasporic community is considered “an outsider, a representative of the other, lacking in full citizenship and cultural immersion” (Karim and Nasir 2014, p. 126). Asian diaspora in America, especially the first generation of migrants, have undergone this cultural disintegration which in turn has resulted in alienation and

identity crisis. The earlier form of immigration includes “a memory of permanent displacement and a complete break from the homeland and a difficult transition to a new language and life in a new world” (Bhatia 2007, p. 221). Such relocation demands a “movement away from one’s culture and customs and a step toward a new ethnic identity and then an eventual assimilation into the ‘melting pot’ of the majority culture” (Bhatia 2007, pp. 221-222). Ketu H. Katrak considers South Asian American writers as one among “the newest voices in a multiethnic Asian America” (Katrak 2009, p. 5). But despite the socio-cultural differences among the South Asian Americans they share a common theme of displacement and alienation which is facilitated by their shared political identity—the former colonies of Britain.

The sense of exile caused by the relocation of immigrants is in a way amplified by their memories of their homeland which acquires a “soteriological and sacred quality” (Cohen 2008, p. 104). However, places and homelands, according to Cynthia J. Miller, are not “merely inert backgrounds where peoples’ identities carve themselves out—already fully formed settings for action and performance” (Miller 2008, p. 286). Rather, they are “moving targets...made in the process of constructing and contesting identities, and deeply implicated in the politics of belonging” (Miller 2008, p. 286). Identity is the “individual’s definition of the self, as well as the individual’s interpretation of the definition of the self, within his/her inner group and the larger society” (Lee 2003, p. 2). It is thus an ever widening process not a finished product.

The identity of person is also closely associated with his place of birth. Place or location plays a dominant role in many novels published by Indian diasporic writers towards the end of the twentieth century. This fact is revealed by the very titles of some of them, for example, *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991) by Agha Shahid Ali, *Falling off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World* (1993) by Pico Iyer and *A Map Where I Live* (1997) by S. Shankar.

The divided loyalties and fragmented dreams of people in an adopted country have been hitherto thought to lead inevitably to the sense of exile. However, in the context of globalisation and transnationalism, the concepts of ‘home’ or ‘homeland’ as giver of emotional security call for instant modification. This change in perspective is best resonated by South Asian writers such as Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jumpha Lahiri, Bapsi Sidhwa and Meena Alexander.

MEENA ALEXANDER – HER OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVES

Born in the Indian city Allahabad, and having grown up in different places in India and abroad, Meena Alexander has experienced the diversity of social and cultural elements that shaped the consciousness of the writer in her. She began as a poet voicing the anxieties of women in general and immigrants in particular in her collections such as *I Root My Name* (1977), *In the Middle Earth* (1977) and *River and Bridge* (1996). She deals, in her poems, with the themes of belonging and home, dislocation and sense of exile, locale and memory, and role of the past influencing the present. In fact, they are considered as her effort “to express her life experiences through the power of language” (Huang 2006, p. 175). Her two novels *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997) focus on “women’s diasporic experiences that reflect her own journey from locale to locale” (Huang 2006, p. 175). Stephanie Han also affirms that the main concern of the literary works of Alexander is the “physical and emotional effects of diaspora” (Han 2014, p. 283). According to Bella Adams, Alexander emphasises that Afro Americans and Asian Americans have “shared preoccupation with identity, which is figuratively understood in terms of an unlockable gate”

(Adams 2008, p. 1). She goes on to explain that identity can be understood not only in terms of finding out the answer for the question “Who am I?” (Adams 2008, p. 1). The place where one lives and the socio-cultural elements punctuating it also play an important role in shaping the consciousness of people and help them search for their identity.

Alexander provides samples of cultural difference in her novel *Manhattan Music*. Sosa, Sandhya’s mother, and Muriel, Stephen’s mother are different in their attitude to the marriage of their children. As a typical Indian mother, Sosa tries to find a better suitor for her daughter Sandhya. She wants Sandhya to “keep up the family lines” (Alexander 1998, p. 24) that is the duty of the children. She finds two young men, the Kuriokose boy, an MBA from Stanford, and the public school trained Kandathil lad, for her daughter. Her desperate effort is juxtaposed against the casual attitude of Muriel, who considers “his (Stephen’s) life is his own” (Alexander 1998, p. 35). Moreover, differences in the culture prevent the people of the respective countries to understand the sensibilities of the other. Sosa, on seeing six month old Dora, Sandhya’s daughter, sleeping separately shouts at her daughter for not doing her duty as a mother. But children in Western countries sleep in rooms of their own, as a matter of course.

Asian American writings are primarily concerned with the portrayal of the sensibilities of the Asians who have migrated to America under various circumstances. Memories of the homeland and the conscious attempts of the individuals to live in the past characterise the works of Asian American writers. Sandra Ponzanesi identifies what is distinct about Alexander’s genius. To the author the act of writing constitutes a shelter and it gives her, “a space where the dissonant part of the self comes together in bits and pieces, where the pledge of affiliation with her land of origin, Kerala, can cohabit with her present meandering through the streets of Manhattan” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 54).

PROBLEM OF DISPLACEMENT

According to Ponzanesi, movements across countries, languages and cultures are the representations of “contemporary lifestyle, whereas the metaphors of time are trapped in a notion of history that is no longer linear” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 55). Ponzanesi asserts that Julia Kristeva’s interest in “theorising the ‘stranger’ is useful because it allows a remapping of the concept of the ‘other’ (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 54). She adds that Kristeva’s theory destroys the “separation between ‘foreigner’ and ‘stranger’ by moving the discussion beyond separation based on national boundaries” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 54). Alexander portrays the tension between these two separate beings – “scattering versus linearity, chaos versus order, and a fragmented self versus universal ‘I’” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 55). In *Manhattan Music*, she exhibits the inner struggle of characters like Sandhya, and their difficulty to cope with the new socio-cultural atmosphere in Manhattan. Sandhya, in the early stages, is unable to integrate herself with the American way of living and fails to become ‘Sandy’ as her husband Stephen wants her to be. Being an introvert, Sandhya rarely reveals her emotions, making it more difficult to facilitate the process of integration. The novelist records her predicament with the following question “Supposing she were to swallow the green card, ingest the plastic, would it pour through her flesh, a curious alchemy that would make her all right in the new world?” (Alexander 1998, p. 7).

The novel portrays Sandhya’s struggles to settle into her new life as an Indian wife of a Jewish American husband and how she fails to achieve it in the early period of her settlement in America owing to her feelings of homelessness caused by her nostalgia. Towards the end of the novel Sandhya tries to commit suicide as a desperate remedy for her

inability to confront the reality that she has become an alien to both her home and adopted country.

As a school girl Sandhya expressed her anger about the condition of women in her country by recording her emotional outburst in her diary. “If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?” and “Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?” (Alexander 1998, p. 26). Through the portrayal of Sandhya, Alexander actually critiques the plight of women and their voiceless agony. The writer expresses her frustration at the helpless situation by comparing Sandhya to a “metal bowl” (Han 2014, p. 284) and it reveals her perceptions of the necessity of “female empowerment and emotional force, and comments on women’s prescribed and traditional roles” (Han 2014, p. 285). Sandhya’s meeting with Stephen in Nainatal, where they fall in love with each other, seems to be a fairy-tale. Even, “the boundaries of the world seemed to shift and open, the dream of one world realised” (Alexander 1998, p. 32). However, unable to forget her lover Gautam who died miserably in India, Sandhya is tormented by the idea that her marriage with Stephen and her new life in America demand her forgetting the past. In fact, she has experienced alienation both in Manhattan and India. Her problem is not about the sense of exile caused by her physical relocations. Rather, it is the result of her frustration in her inability to express herself and live for herself.

SANDHYA’S GROWTH FROM ALIENATION TO SYMBIOSIS

As a young mother with an Indian sensibility Sandhya is unable to adapt herself to living in Manhattan due to her memories of the past, albeit some of them are equally disturbing to her. For example, she cannot enjoy the boat ride to Ellis Island, soon after Stephen and Sandhya settle in New York and she feels out of place. In fact, Sandhya, like any other immigrant who is yet to integrate with the new atmosphere, spends her time idly in thinking about the home country. Stephen expects her to spend her time usefully when Dora is in day care. “The whole New York city lies ahead of you... You have a green card Sandy, you could try for a job” (Alexander 1998, p. 38). Stephen wants her to “take America head on” (Alexander 1998, p. 39). Here, Stephen, though considered by his wife to be indifferent to others’ sensibilities, is the spokesperson of Alexander’s solution to the problem of the women thinking too precisely of their dislocation. Taking up a job and dedicating oneself to an assignment outside one’s obsessive self, would be salutary in the escape route. According to Ponzanesi, Alexander’s writings critique diasporic women as they do not project a “positive view of multiple identities” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 63). In fact, even the homeland is not viewed as a “utopian place of origin but as torn flesh, an absence physically present in the body” (Ponzanesi 2004, p. 63).

Alexander, in an interview, acknowledges that through Sandhya’s character she tries to deal with a “set of voiceless experiences that have to do with the feeling that nobody knows what you are” (Alexander 2000, p. 84). Even Sandhya’s marriage with Stephen has not given her any identity in her adopted country. The writer comments on Sandhya’s marriage that “it’s not partnership for her but something she has drifted into” (Alexander 2000, p. 84). She traces the origin of Sandhya’s sufferings to the haunting memories of her past and they wouldn’t allow her “the space of entry into new life” (Alexander 2004, p. 84). Sandhya’s troubled ‘self’ in America seems to find solace when she returns to Kerala, her homeland, to meet her ailing father Varki. At least, she hopes to find meaning in her life as a daughter by helping her father in the hospital. The very idea that she has come to Kerala “to be of help, to be of use” (Alexander 1998, p. 101) seems to be soul-satisfying to her. In fact, her return to Tiruvella where she is needed as a daughter makes her feel that she has shed a

“second skin, an itchy nasty thing” (Alexander 1998, p. 105). Later she returns to Manhattan with a renewed hope that her life will be totally different from what it has been hitherto fore. Her longing for freedom from the shackles of her domestic life is expressed by her writing ‘wings’ in a tattered journal. But all she can now do to express her sense of freedom is by “walking the streets of Manhattan” (Alexander 1998, p. 102) and staring into “the windows of the new shops that have opened on Broadway” (Alexander 1998, p. 102).

In her fear of solitude, she is anxious to know “would she be able to live her own life, feel her way through?” (Alexander 1998, p. 72). Despite her fear of solitude, “she cannot prevent her feelings and she hates to be dictated to” (Alexander 1998, p. 72). The anxiety continues to haunt her in New York and thus prevents her from finding affinity with others. Then she remembers her grandmother Eliamma’s advice to “use your mind...and then you can live your life” (Alexander 1998, p. 72). She could understand the significance of it only the hard way and could find a new meaning in her life by reinventing herself. It is quite surprising to find that her grandmother who had never left the compound without escort when she lived knew how to live but educated and exposed to several cultural facets Sandhya has been groping to live her life both in India and in Manhattan. Her life in America makes her a “tattooed thing” (Alexander 1998, p. 72) and she feels that the borders she has crossed are responsible for that. Stephen, curiously, could not understand the disintegration of the mind and soul of his wife. Sandhya, even in her life in India, has been confronted with her anxiety to understand the meaning of life. She feels that reason and the sense of duty to family often make individuals suppress their emotional bondage with the other sex. Sandhya senses that she is “cast adrift in a world neither of her parents had prepared her for” (Alexander 1998, p. 72). She believes “what could make one ‘whole’” is good; what “tormented and splintered” is bad (Alexander 1998, p. 69). Her life with Stephen does not make her understand her ‘whole’ and she feels that it is rather fragmented and incomplete. Nor does she consider New York as ‘home’ that would provide her with solace and sense of belonging. In fact, she is not inclined to return to New York when she comes to India to meet her ailing father. Her married life has its own complexities though “she does not have the wits to name or the resolve to openly acknowledge [them]” (Alexander 1998, p. 140).

Sandhya’s meetings with Rashid, the Egyptian, are the only occasions when she seems to feel comfortable and she even seems to find a new meaning for her life when she is in his company. But her attempt to find a meaning in an alien soil through her relationship with Rashid, an Egyptian who shares a common element of cultural and turbulent political background with her, fails in the end. When she fails to escape from her passionate attachment to Rashid, she can think only of suicide as the solution. But her attempted suicide is not without its relevance. This negating activity marks a transitional stage. In the opinion of Bhabha, such an experience is the intervention of the “beyond” (Bhabha 1994, p. 9) that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where “presencing” (Bhabha 1994, p. 9) begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of relocation of the home and world. He calls it “the unhomeliness - that is a condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Bhabha 1994, p. 9). It destroys that part of Sandhya’s retrospective consciousness that has prevented her from integrating herself with her life in America. Her regaining of consciousness constitutes a new birth. As the writer explains in her interview with Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasiah, “it is a rite of passage” (Alexander 2000, p. 84). Aided by Draupadi and Sakhi, her cousin, in her road to regeneration, she becomes open minded to think of other options. This makes Alexander hold Sandhya a success model.

DRAUPADI DINKINS: A PERFECT FOIL FOR SANDHYA

Draupadi Dinkins, the alter ego of Sandhya, also experiences alienation in America despite her multicultural ancestry. She, in her childhood, is imbued with her father's assertion that "born in America, there's nothing you can't be" (Alexander 1998, p. 90). Her first disappointment happens when O' Flaherty, Jimmy's father, warns her to keep away from his son as she is not their equal in terms of their nationality. Draupadi blackens the Barbie doll with *kajal*, the black paste that is used in South Asia as a cosmetic to decorate one's eyes. She also ties over the doll's mouth with a strip of her mother's saree and seals its eyes with wax. This is symbolic of the condition of women in the alien soil. At the same time, unlike Sandhya, she refuses to confine herself to a small world expected of women. In fact, her disappointments make her more resolute in handling failures.

Draupadi, though has never visited India, has her origin in India and proves to be a perfect foil for Sandhya. In a way, her multicultural background has prepared her to face her life in New York with greater confidence and like her father she "remembers as much of Trinidad as a snake would its shed skin" (Alexander 1998, p. 50). Her only bond with India is that her great-grandmother had come to Trinidad as a bonded labourer. Alexander says "syncretism was her being and it might work for her, overcoming the barriers she felt she had faced since childhood" (1998, p. 52). She too longs for a world that promises equality devoid of racism. During her conversation with Jay, Sandhya's cousin, she admits that Lady Day's song made her dream of a new world. "All the colours of the sun...painted onto human skin—the target of desire—mingling" (Alexander 1998, p. 53). She is the chief instrument through whom Alexander gives expression to her own vision. Sam Naidu quotes the words of Miki Flockemann who explains that such literary representations of transformative processes offer "utopian glimpse(s) of an alternative world... in which female subjects resolve the tensions of diaspora" (Naidu 2008, p. 373). South Asian women writers such as Meena Alexander and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlight the transformation of women in the adopted country.

In her interview with Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasiah, the novelist has put forth her dream vision of "a radical humanism" (Alexander 2000, p. 88). It means "all human beings have certain inalienable rights" (Alexander 2000, p. 88). The American democracy professes it and struggles to practise it. That is why she loves "living in America" (Alexander 2000, p. 88). She has no political or social project but holds on to the vision of social justice and equality. She wrote a poem called *Art of Pariahs* in response to a series of racial incidents in New York. At the end of the poem, she expresses her longing that "people could exist, as it were, freed of their skin" (Alexander 2000, p. 88).

Draupadi is a performing artist influenced by Emerson and Thoreau particularly by the former's advice to his reader to forget the past, "fling memory away, live in the eternal present like roses" (Alexander 1998, p. 53). Draupadi evinces a keen interest in literature that highlights the "ferocious indignities of racism in America and the possibilities of radical liberation" (Alexander 1998, p. 54). Her optimistic attitude towards life is further emphasised by her nonchalant attitude during her break up with Rinaldo and later with Rashid. Draupadi feels that there is an emptiness in Sandhya's soul and identifies its source in her dwelling only in the past. She suggests a concrete remedy: "Be like the roses, cut off the past, frisk it, skin it, live in the present!" (Alexander 1998, p. 62). She advises Sandhya to live her life for herself and take care of herself. Draupadi is, thus, not only dynamic and positive in herself but educates others to be so.

REDIFINING THE CONCEPT – HOME

Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee quote approvingly Dorinne Kondo's definition of 'home' as a "safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community" (Anderson & Lee 2005, p. 13). Kondo expands his concept of home as something that means "radically different things to the abused spouse, rejected gay child, or the homeless" (Anderson and Lee 2005, p.13). However for the marginalised minorities like Asians in the Americas who are historically excluded from citizenship and nationality "home has always been a problematic and contested terrain" (Anderson and Lee 2005, p. 13)

Sandhya is at times confused whether to consider Tiruvella, where her parents lived, her 'home' or New York where she has been living with Stephen. Sandhya's cousin Sakhi is portrayed by Alexander as a contrast to her by her ability to look for a positive aspect in a negative element. At first, she laments how women marry "in the hope of some permanence" (Alexander 1998, p. 129) while around them married couples get divorced. Later, she considers it as another sign of human beings asserting themselves "Yes, I have some control over my life, yes" (Alexander 1998, p. 130). She is practical and does not feel any guilt as many of her compatriots do in "switching passports as if they were mortgaging one world for another" (Alexander 1998, p. 132). She has understood the need for the "ceaseless metamorphosis of spirit" (Alexander 1998, p. 132) and becomes an American. She remains unaffected by the transformation of spirit required to find meaning in life.

The conflict of interest in the lives of immigrants is basically caused by their stubbornness to cling to the past on the one hand and their refusal to acclimatise themselves to the new environment on the other. Alexander endorses that the sense of exile is caused among immigrants, especially Indian immigrants, by their relocation to America, the land of boundless freedom, from their homeland that emphasises rigid rules. However, the phenomenal changes in science and technology have narrowed down the geo-political borders of the countries and the world has shrunk to a great hut expecting humanity to adapt itself to this global transformation. As a result, the concept of 'home' as a provider of sense of belonging requires to be modified. Living in different countries from her childhood prompted Alexander to realise that "a single home is impossible" (Han 2014, p. 284). Through a character in *Manhattan Music*, she reveals this. Chandu, the cousin of Sandhya, tries to help her solve her problem by indicating that "the world is getting much smaller....So what does that do to our sense of belonging?" (Alexander 1998, p. 189). The open ended question implies the necessity of seeking solution in the direction of outgrowing our limited notion of home and belonging. As Bhabha suggests, "there are contemporary compulsion to move beyond: to turn the present into the 'post'; ...to touch the future on its hither side" (Bhabha 1994, p. 8). It behooves well for writers to envision the sense of belonging to accelerate the prospect of symbiotic assimilation.

TOWARDS SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

In fact, Sandhya's problem of transforming herself to the tune of the adopted country is shared by many immigrants. Globalisation has, however, removed the boundaries of almost all the countries and settling in a foreign country is not uncommon today. In this context, the idea of motherland as the only place that gives a sense of belonging is to be reconsidered.

Shaki, Sandhya's cousin, is able to cope with this problem by indulging herself in social work and organising meetings of the immigrants where they share their experiences. When she takes Sandhya to one such meeting in Columbia University Sandhya feels that she has entered a new country where she requires no "green card or any other sign of belonging" (Alexander 1998, p. 211). The old woman from Lahore, Pakistan who migrated to New York

and has worked as an *ayah* for two decades becomes jobless when she could no longer work. But she is fortunate enough to find a shelter and now she is learning to remake her life. This becomes a source of inspiration for other immigrants who are searching for their lost identity in New York.

Sakhi feels that Sandhya should be exposed to the difficulties of immigrants, both men and women, and made to realise that she is not the only person to face the problem of identity crisis in America. Alexander suggests the awakening of Sandhya by her reaction to Draupadi's proposed dramatisation of an episode in *Mahabharata* where the mythological Draupadi was saved by Lord Krishna. In fact, Sakhi justifies her choice of this episode by emphasising that the mythic Draupadi "spent much of her life in exile" (Alexander 1998, p. 218), similar to their lives. In an interview Alexander reveals the relevance of the name Sandhya which means twilight in Sanskrit. She gives the name to express the "in-betweenness" (Alexander 2000, p. 87) through the character. The writer suggests that her attempted suicide is an affirmative act because in doing so she kills "the part of herself that could not live because she has not integrated her experiences" (Alexander 2000, p. 84). After this negating activity which marks her transitional stage, the word 'exile' does not mean anything to her. With renewed hope and awakened sense of reality she is prepared to face life with greater confidence and decides to "find her own way" (Alexander 1998, p. 222). She understands that she cannot depend on others and she has to trust herself if she wants to live her life. She does not want "to be suspended in midair...hung up, swaying" (Alexander 1998, p. 223) but is inclined to "stay close to the ground" (Alexander 1998, p. 223). The novel concludes with Sandhya's realisation that there is a place for her in New York and "she would live out her life in America" (Alexander 1998, p. 228). This marks a crucial stage in her self-development. Living verily in the place of one's settlement, one can preserve one's identity.

CONCLUSION

Alexander's novel *Manhattan Music* is a positive assertion of the great potential of diasporic life. The immigrant is no longer to feel rootless and alienated in the foreign land and instead focus on improvement of life and living. Through a series of experiences of women characters, in *Manhattan Music*, the novelist suggests ways of negotiating life in the foreign country. She rejects the belief that one stands in danger of losing one's identity and would be forced to merge in the melting pot of the American civilisation. Though America is not free of ethnic discriminations, the American society's belief in democracy and the constitutional guarantee of equality holds the greatest prospect of self-esteem and self-actualisation for all settlers in America.

In *Manhattan Music*, Sandhya undergoes traumatic experience which marked the intervention of the 'beyond' which facilitates her to experience extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. Again, Sandhya's husband recommends she take an assignment and do some useful work to overcome her ennui. Draupadi, in the novel, throws herself wholeheartedly into her profession, and thus realises the dignity of life by the attitude 'work is worship'. Sakhi, as her name suggests, is 'friend' to all. She is an embodiment of a fulfilled happy life. She is at peace with herself and remains the cause that peace is in others. As a social worker she arranges the meetings of the expatriates and allows them to share their experiences and makes them feel at home through bonding with one another. The major symbol of the novel is the Emersonian 'Rose' that spreads its fragrance wherever it is transplanted. Such a life is realised by the diasporic life of quite a few Asian Indians and Alexander propagates the replication of the pattern of happy self-actualisation by the immigrants.

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