

Izabella Kimak

**“A Bridge That Seizes Crossing”:
Art, Violence and Ethnic Identity
in Meena Alexander’s *Manhattan Music***

Meena Alexander, an American writer born in India and now living in New York City, in all of her creative work exhibits a sensitivity to the experience of crossing borders, which entails the need to form new, hybrid identities and to learn to juggle not only diverse cultures but diverse languages as well. In comparison to other women writers of the South Asian diaspora in the US, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, Alexander has been somewhat overlooked by general readers, although her writing has received substantial praise from critics, especially those of Indian provenance. However, scholarly attention so far has mostly been paid to Alexander’s poetry and memoir at the expense of her two fictional texts: *Nampally Road* (1991), set in India, and *Manhattan Music* (1997), oscillating between Kerala and New York. In the latter novel, as well as in her poetry and memoir, Alexander explores the experience of immigration with its ensuing feelings of uprootedness and displacement. In this respect, Alexander’s thematic interests seem to coincide with those of other writers of the South Asian diaspora in the US,¹ but this apparent similarity is in fact somewhat misleading. With its carefully crafted language and its elaborate structure, *Manhattan Music*

1 This fact is stressed by numerous scholars who have attempted to characterize South Asian American literature as a unique body of writing ever since “Indians, whether as South Asians or as diasporic Indians, acquired a distinct literary identity” (Gurleen Grewal 91) in the 1990s. In his chapter devoted to the presentation of South Asian American literature, published as early as 1992, Tapping writes: “Like other ethnic literatures in North America, writing by immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is concerned with personal and communal identity, recollection of the homeland, and the active response to this ‘new’ world” (285). Gurleen Grewal posits in turn that “[o]ne of the abiding concerns for most first-generation immigrants, poised between living ‘back home’ and in the present, is how to balance their dual affiliations in a country with the myth of the melting pot” (98). Finally, Shankar and Srikanth add that South Asian American writing occupies “interstitial spaces created by postcoloniality, diaspora, transnationalism, and multiple and ever shifting ‘borderlines’” (375).

offers a representation of border crossings that is, in my view, unparalleled in South Asian American fiction.

My analysis of Alexander's *Manhattan Music* will be informed by recent theories concerning the spatial construction of ethnic identity, for Alexander presents her characters as evolving not only through time, but also, perhaps primarily, through the traversing of space. The difficulties inherent in the process of crossing borders are succinctly captured by the fragment of a poem included in the novel that I have chosen for the title of this essay. "A bridge that seizes crossing" signifies the difficult road that an immigrant needs to take in order to achieve a degree of self-acceptance in the new cultural environment. Although the presentation of movement as a constitutive element of identity is also explored by ethnic writers in general and South Asian American writers in particular, what Alexander contributes to the discussion of ethnic identity is its connection to the space of artistic creation. Art in her novel not only serves as a reflection of the processes of immigration and acculturation, but also becomes a universal language, whose importance is stressed both by the thematic concerns of the novel and by its structure.

The novel tells the story of Sandhya, an Indian woman in her mid-thirties, who currently lives in Manhattan, having married a Jewish-American man whose fascination with India had led him to Nainatal, an Indian mountain resort, where the two met. Several years later and already a mother, Sandhya begins to feel the heavy burden of living in a country which she does not think of as her own. Her immigrant anxiety, coupled with the death of her beloved father back in India and her rejection by her Egyptian lover in America, leads Sandhya to a nervous breakdown and a suicide attempt. The story of immigrant trauma, not at all unfamiliar in the context of South Asian American fiction,² is rendered by Alexander in a structurally complex way. She punctuates the story of Sandhya, narrated mostly in the third person, with slim chapters written in the first person from the perspective of Draupadi Dinkins, a conceptual artist whom Sandhya meets and befriends in New York City. By virtue of doing so, Alexander achieves several aims simultaneously. For one thing, this structural choice enables her to pinpoint intersections and overlaps between various spaces—both geographical and metaphorical—that her narrative evokes in its discussion of ethnic identity. All of Draupadi's artistic projects focus on the issue of ethnicity and her choice to explore by means of art not only her own ethnic background but also that of other minority groups in the US makes Draupadi, and—by inference—Alexander, a spokesperson for universal dimensions of the experience of crossing borders. At the same time, the narrative fragmentation, achieved both through the structural division into chapters as well as through the non-linear, associational structure

2 Bharati Mukherjee's early novel *Wife* may serve as an example here.

of each chapter, reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness, serves as a mirror of an immigrant's troubled mind. Ketu Katrak's comment that "[n]on-linear narrative structures"—frequent in postcolonial literature—serve to “recreate the simultaneities of spaces” (*Politics* 40) certainly pertains as well to Alexander's novel.

Space and Ethnic Identity

The convergence between spatiality and the construction of identity has been theorized by scholars for several decades now, ever since the so-called spatial turn within the humanities. Currently, the prevalent scholarly opinion holds that identity does not only evolve along a temporal axis, but is spatially located as well. For example, Susan Friedman argues for “the centrality of space... to the locations of identity” (19). She understands identity in spatial terms as “a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges” (19). Hybrid identity, a particularly salient form of identity for ethnic subjects, is a result of “movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting” (Friedman 24). Thus, hybrid identity is frequently produced in borderlands or spaces in between cultures. Helena Grice connects the spatial theory of identity to the literary productions of Asian American women writers by claiming that space frequently acts as a metaphor for identity and that female writers tend to search for self through place (200). Analyzing Alexander's famous memoir *Fault Lines*, Grice posits that “Alexander's search is for her identity through an imaginative exploration of space” (217). Alexander's fictional characters are likewise preoccupied with issues of movement, border crossings, home and belonging as they bear upon the ever-changing sense of who one is and where one stands.

As far as geographical landscapes are concerned, Alexander's novel moves back and forth between Manhattan and southern India, both places familiar to Sandhya, with Draupadi's account adding several more locations that diffuse the binary model of US-versus-India, found in much of South Asian American writing.³

3 The vast majority of literary texts by South Asian American writers tend to focus on two locations: the home country and the adopted country, which are presented in a hierarchical fashion, the latter visibly favored by the character or narrator. Characterizing the genre of Asian immigrant woman's novel in general, Inderpal Grewal posits that a characteristic feature of the genre is that it sets up “the binary oppositions between the United States as first world site of freedom and ‘Asia’ as third world site of repression” (63).

Draupadi speaks of her origins in the following way: “I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from slaves, pride of Kala Pani, sister to the Middle Passage. Also part Asian-American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood: railroads in the West, the pineapple and sugarcane fields” (47). However, the novel does not make it clear whether this statement is a truthful account of Draupadi’s origins; it is equally possible that this mix of ethnicities is actually an act of artistic creation. With her—whether real or imagined—mixed-blood origins, Draupadi creates herself as a symbol of America, a composite that it is of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. She evokes in her account major ethnic groups that migrated or were forced to migrate to America from outside the continent: black slaves, Europeans and Asians; at the same time, she leaves out from the mosaic Native Americans or Latinos/as, whom she may view as original inhabitants of the land. “[T]he fragments of her past, real and imagined, swarming into her art” (53) are used by Draupadi as artistic material. Draupadi, a symbol of immigrant America, a person who feels at ease with the multiple strands of her heritage, functions in the novel as Sandhya’s alter ego, the “almost... double” (49) of the anxious immigrant.

The multiplicity of geographical landscapes the novel is set in or otherwise evokes—including North America, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean—serves to show the linkage between various ethnic groups inhabiting the North American continent. It likewise suggests that it is impossible to limit the discussion of the experience of migration to one ethnic group or one location only. On the contrary, the novel explores global interconnections between lands and people without erasing the specific histories of these ethnic groups. Many of the connections that “Alexander weaves into her narrative” include “social and political incidents from India and America, for example, Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad, the threat of Muslim fundamentalism in Manhattan, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by a Sri Lanka suicide bomber, racism towards Indians in New Jersey, Christian fundamentalism... and the immigrant issues of New York City” (Moka-Dias 3). Talking about Alexander’s writing in general, Rajini Srikanth terms the writer’s position a “globalism of outrage” (88), which she understands to mean the author’s preoccupation with both local and global issues, a sensitivity that Linda McDowell in a different context calls “global localism” (38). Srikanth explains Alexander’s interest in both local and global injustices in the following way: “a literature born in the United States... must of necessity evoke other locations” (87) for in the global world what happens in one place affects and is affected by events occurring elsewhere. Alexander herself, in an interview by Lopamudra Basu, corroborates her interests in matters both local and global when she says that in her work “place is layered on place to make a palimpsest of sense” (Alexander, “The Poet” 32).

Ethnicity and Art

Manhattan Music, however, does not focus solely on geographical landscapes and the roles they play in the representation of migration, but it also explores more metaphorical realms of art, violence and ethnic identity. Unlike other South Asian American writers delving into border crossings, Alexander situates the experience of migration and the construction of a viable ethnic identity against the backdrop of art. Artistic creativity, especially in its visual and conceptual forms, is imbued in Alexander's narrative with the power to express the precarious position of an ethnic individual and give voice to the history of racial oppression. It is also shown to have the capacity to aid an individual in the process of coming to terms with who she is and where she fits within the fabric of American multiculturalism.

From the very beginning of her artistic career, Alexander's Draupadi has created art with a heavy political agenda. The teenage Draupadi's first artistic, or quasi-artistic, enterprise results from her desertion by her first boyfriend at the insistence of his racist father. As a reaction to such an insult, Draupadi takes a Barbie doll, smears it black with *kajal*, a traditional kohl-like cosmetic used in Asia to darken the eyelids and eyelashes, ties a piece of pink cloth torn from her mother's sari around the doll's lips and seals her eyes with wax (92). Although this act is essentially a method of coming to terms with her personal loss and anger, it signals at the same time certain areas of interest that the adult Draupadi will keep exploring in her art, namely ethnicity and gender as two primary markers of identity that lead to one's subjection to the regulatory mechanisms of and exploitation by various ideologies. The Barbie doll's function as a symbol of mainstream ideals of female beauty is addressed here by the adolescent's use of ethnically marked *kajal* and sari. What Draupadi's first artistic project shows is that women whose bodies differ—whether due to physical features, mannerisms, dress or make-up—from what is considered conventionally attractive are deemed unworthy of (male) attention. The fact that both the doll's lips and eyes are covered may testify to the powerlessness and voicelessness of women who do not comply with the mainstream's ideals of femininity: following Draupadi's artistic intervention the doll can neither "see" nor "speak," she is deprived both of voice and of sight to stand for a redundant addition to the world the young woman feels herself to be.⁴

4 It has to be conceded here that oftentimes an ethnic woman's exotic appeal may be an asset enabling her assimilation into the mainstream American culture by means of acquiring a white partner. However, as Chu claims, "when Asian women seek or accept cross-cultural mentoring by white men they must also respond to the white men's fantasies of Asian women as docile, easily accessible mistresses rather than equals whose cultures, histories, and needs might be as complex, vital, or intractable as their own" (93). This is, however, an aspect of white-Asian relations that the young Draupadi seems unaware of.

A few examples of art Draupadi creates as a mature woman include a performance piece titled “Women of Color Whirling Through the World” prepared for the Museum of Natural History and an androgynous figure made of wire and condoms built for the AIDS show at Franklin Furnace. The figure is painted orange and put inside a box, next to which the artist herself is standing, displaying a deeply ironic sign that reads: “CHOOSE YOUR BLOOD. THIS IS AMERICA” (46). Even though the show is devoted to the AIDS epidemic, which has more to do with one’s sexuality than ethnicity/race, Draupadi does not refrain from touching on the latter in her project. The fact that the figure is painted orange, which is not a natural skin color of any ethnic group, may suggest that indeed in America one’s skin color is at best a matter of secondary significance. However, when read in the context of the whole novel, it is obvious that Draupadi’s figure and the sign the artist is holding are an ironic commentary on the impossibility of shedding one’s skin color. After all, one cannot escape the constraints of one’s ethnic body,⁵ which is made clear by a poignant fragment of the novel relating Sandhya’s thoughts on the issue: “She gazed at her two hands, extended now in front of her. 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 [her husband]?” (7). Sandhya in essence fantasizes about a magical transformation into a human version of a Barbie doll, which would be acceptable to the mainstream society, her husband and, most importantly, herself.

That the question of ethnicity is a recurring motif in Draupadi’s art becomes clear from a detailed account of the performance she prepares to present at the Poets’ Café. Asked to “[d]ream up a performance piece... that involves crossing borders” (118), Draupadi creates a performance that attempts to weave together histories of many races. In the process, she makes references to canonical American Anglo-Saxon writers, Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau, as well as ethnic writers, represented by Harriet Jacobs, and the so-called discoverer of America, Christopher Columbus. Albeit evocative of the past, Draupadi’s artistic piece renders the complex history of interracial relationships in America “in the present tense” (119), perhaps to show the continuing legacy of what happened decades and centuries before. Draupadi performs together with three other women, “one Black, one Anglo, one Hispanic-Asian” (119), who are supposed to represent

5 In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander expresses a similar opinion: “I can make myself up and this is the enticement, the exhilaration, the compulsive energy of America. But only up to a point. And the point, the sticking point, is my dark female body. I may try the voice-over bit, the words-over bit, the textual pyrotechnic bit, but my body is here, now, and cannot be shed. No more than any other human being can shed her or his body and still live” (202).

all the major ethnic groups that have migrated to the US and to give voice to their repressed histories. To give an example, one of the women plays the role of “Tawana Brawley, wrapping herself up in plastic, smearing excrement on her dark skin, tarring herself, setting white feathers on her flesh like the white men did to her foremothers. Then she crept into a plastic garbage bag” (120). Present and past are blurred in this performance: Tawana Brawley is a real person known for her false accusations of a group of influential white men of alleged gang rape after she had been found mutilated and covered in feces inside a garbage bag (Taibbi and Sims-Phillips xii). In the performance, “Tawana” as if goes back in time to become a female slave punished by her master for some unnamed offence. Even if the allegations made by real-life Brawley did not hold a grain of truth, what she did and what one of Draupadi's partners recreates in her performance is a powerful reminder of the victimization and objectification of ethnic female bodies by those in positions of power, be it the power sanctioned by the institution of slavery in the past or the power of access to voice and authority in the present.

Draupadi herself plays several roles in the performance piece delivered at the Poets' Café. She is supposed to represent her own ethnic group and hence is at the outset called “Dottie,” a word reminiscent of a racial slur of “dot-head” hurled repeatedly at immigrants from India.⁶ Yet, she also stands for all women doubly oppressed on account of their ethnicity and gender. In the final fragment of her performance, she is locked in a cage and supposed to represent African-American writer Harriet Jacobs, or rather—to be more precise—Linda Brent, the pseudonym under which Jacobs wrote her autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which she gave an account, among other things, of being sexually harassed by her master. When Draupadi's male partner, playing the role of Linda's master, Dr. Flint, offers her an orange and asks for her name, the artist cries out her real name, Draupadi. Unable to pronounce the name Draupadi, the white man simplifies it to Dropti before inventing an Anglo-Saxon name for her. “‘Bette,’ he called me. ‘Bette, you Asian cunt. Come over here, slow, take it slowly now.’ And he held his hand with a lump of sugar in it as if he we beckoning a mule” (123). Due to its striking conflation of ethnicities, the fragment reveals certain convergences between the histories of ethnic women. It is a widely-known historical fact that black slaves were renamed by their masters, which served to annihilate any trace of personal history a black slave may have

6 In an endnote to their interview with Meena Alexander, Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva mention the existence of the “dotbusters,” who are defined as “racist and violent gangs that target Indians, particularly women who wear the traditional dot (*bindi*) on their foreheads” (53). The dotbusters were especially active in New Jersey, the birthplace of Alexander's Draupadi.

had. Draupadi is likewise renamed during the performance. Her real name, taken from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, is shortened to Dropti, which is easier to pronounce to Americans, and then exchanged altogether for an ordinary Bette. In the process of being renamed, Draupadi is supposed to forgo her identity and accept the authority of others (here, an Anglo-Saxon male) to name her and thus shape her identity.⁷

Draupadi's name in itself carries important connotations. According to the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandava brothers. The most famous story concerning Draupadi is the account of her husbands' losing her, together with themselves and their kingdom, to their enemy Duryodhana in a game of dice. When the new owner of Draupadi orders her to be stripped naked in front of the whole court, Draupadi, realizing that she cannot count on her husbands' help, asks Lord Krishna to protect her. Her wish is granted and her sari gets miraculously extended so that she cannot be disrobed and in this way dishonored (The *Mahabharata*, Book Two, Section LXVII). In another fragment of Alexander's novel the mythic Draupadi is mentioned as one of several women suffering at the hands of men: "Sita, Ophelia, Draupadi, Antigone" (194). The list comprises women representing both Indian and western literary archetypes. According to the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Sita is the wife of the king Rama famous for her loyalty to her husband. Yet, after being kidnapped by the demon Ravana, her faithfulness is doubted by her husband and hence she needs to undertake a test of fire, from which she "emerges... unscathed" (Young 12). In the Hindu collective imagination, Sita functions as a paragon of wifely virtue and sacrifice. Yet, as Katrak rightly points out, folk versions of the myth of Sita show her not as "a model of silent suffering and self-sacrifice" but rather as "an example of female resistance to patriarchy" (*Politics* 58). For example, in one of the versions of the story, fed up with her husband's repeated accusations of infidelity, after successfully passing one more test, Sita asks Mother Earth to take her body. This way Sita becomes an Eastern counterpart of Antigone and Ophelia, both women brought to death one way or another by their male kin. By placing the Indian mythical princesses Draupadi and Sita alongside female characters from Western

7 The issue of (re-)naming is also tackled by Bharati Mukherjee in her well-known novel *Jasmine*. The protagonist keeps getting new names from the men she is romantically attached to: first, her Indian husband changes her name Jyoti to Jasmine, and later, her two American lovers, unable to pronounce her Indian name, call her Jase and Jane, respectively. Each instance of re-naming is in essence an act of asserting authority over the woman's identity. In her analysis of Mukherjee's short story "Orbiting," in which the characters shorten their own ethnic names so that they sound more American, Shilpa Davé writes in a somewhat similar vein that "[t]hese fictionalized names become a construct for an acceptable ethnicity" (107).

master narratives, Alexander points to the shared history of gendered oppression that women have to contend with regardless of what part of the world they come from and what form the oppression in question may take.

Violence and/in Art

With its focus on the questions of ethnicity and gender, the art *Draupadi* creates constitutes a relevant element of Alexander's narrative, showing the prevalence of violence in the history of virtually any ethnic minority. The connection between art, violence, ethnicity and space in *Manhattan Music* is further illuminated if one takes into account what W. J. T. Mitchell writes in his essay "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*." Although Mitchell's article is devoted primarily to Spike Lee's movie, what the author points out about the connections of art and violence as well as about art's capacity to transcend, or complicate, clear-cut borders between spaces is relevant with regard to Alexander's novel as well. Addressing the question of public art, Mitchell begins his essay with a powerful example that demonstrates the convergence of (public) art and (real or symbolic) violence. The example in question is the Beijing Massacre and what Mitchell calls "the confrontation of images at the central public space in China" (29), that is the demolition by student protesters of Mao's statue and their subsequent construction of the statue of the "Goddess of Liberty." This transgression was met with a very literal violence enacted by the state—the new statue together with its supporters was wiped off the face of the square. What happened on Tiananmen Square in 1989, together with instances of public outrage at the creation of certain works of public art in the US, leads Mitchell to argue for the "erosion of the boundary between public and private art [which] is accompanied by a collapsing of the distinction between symbolic and actual violence, whether the 'official' violence of police, juridical or legislative power, or 'unofficial' violence in the responses of private individuals" (32). Mitchell does not subscribe to a conventional definition of public art, which would denote an artistic object or image displayed in a public space for the sake of viewers who may otherwise not be exposed to art on any regular basis. Instead, he quotes Scott Burton, who redefines the concept of public art by claiming that all art "might be called public art. Not because it is necessarily located in public places, but because the content is more than the private history of the maker" (Mitchell 33, footnote).

Further, Mitchell distinguishes in his essay three types of connections between violence and (public) art. First, a work of public art may constitute in itself an act or object of violence when it does symbolic violence to the viewers or when it falls victim to vandalism, respectively. Second, the artistic image may function

as a weapon of violence, “a device for attack, coercion, incitement, or more subtle ‘dislocations’ of public spaces” (Mitchell 37), encouraging the viewers to show a particular reaction. Finally, an object of public art may be a representation of violence, “whether a realistic imitation of a violent act, or a monument, trophy, memorial, or other trace of past violence” (37–38).

Obviously, it remains a matter of speculation whether Alexander was familiar with Mitchell’s essay as she was writing her novel, yet, interestingly, in her depictions of Draupadi’s art she points out all the three ties between art and violence that Mitchell enumerates in his article. Even though Draupadi’s art is not presented in public spaces but rather in venues specifically created for the presentation and promotion of art (such as the Poets’ Café and Franklin Furnace, both based on real places in New York City), her artistic productions conform to Burton’s definition of public art cited above in that they touch upon “more than the private history of the maker,” for example, issues such as the AIDS epidemic, the discrimination against people of color, or the construction of a woman’s body as a product of the mainstream. What is more, all of the artistic pieces Draupadi creates are in one way or another linked to violence. Following Mitchell’s typology of the ties between art and violence, Draupadi’s art may be viewed as a weapon of violence inasmuch as it yanks the viewers from their comfortable positions and forces them to reconsider their own complicity with racist or sexist ideologies. Draupadi’s art definitely constitutes also a representation of violence since it portrays and engraves on the viewers’ memories histories of violence perpetrated by the dominant classes upon ethnic minorities, especially women. Finally, art in *Manhattan Music* functions as a very literal weapon of violence: it is with the use of an artistic utensil—a piece of rope Draupadi intends to use in one of her installations—that Sandhya tries to commit suicide by hanging herself in Draupadi’s studio.

Sandhya’s use of an artistic object as an instrument of death is just one example of how deeply the life of Alexander’s protagonist is intertwined with the sphere of art. Even though she is not an artist herself, many crucial events in her life occur against the backdrop of artistic enterprise in one form or another. Significantly, all of the artistic pieces that have exerted some impact on Sandhya play with the notion of borders to represent her ambivalence when it comes to her status as a woman of color in the US. Unlike Draupadi’s art, artistic objects relevant to Sandhya do not focus on real violence perpetrated in the history of racial relations in the US, but rather on symbolic violence against recent immigrants, which manifests itself in their exclusion from the public space.

To begin with, Sandhya remembers very vividly a visit to an art gallery in Hyderabad with her mother when she was still a child. She was transfixed at the sight of Ravi Varma’s painting of “a caged lady whose long 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). Ravi Varma, a revered nineteenth-century Indian painter, gained fame for his representations of scenes from the two most important Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as for his paintings of middle-class women.⁸ On the basis of a short description of his painting in *Manhattan Music*, as filtered through the consciousness of a girl, it is difficult to decide with any certainty whether Alexander is describing in her novel a real picture by Varma. Yet, what is more important in view of Alexander's narrative preoccupations are certain motifs that the painting plays with. The woman shown in the picture is wearing a white sari, which accentuates her dark skin and black hair.⁹ She is carrying a knife, either as a means of self-defense or a weapon of attack. The cage, too, has an ambiguous meaning: the female figure may be shown inside a cage painted on the canvas, or, alternatively, the frame of the painting may seem to the child-viewer a sort of a cage keeping the woman inside the picture. Even though the description of the painting leaves these riddles unsolved, the choice of the word "cage" is significant in itself inasmuch as it conveys a certain restriction imposed on the woman resulting in her impossibility of exercising free will.

The notions of borders, restrictions and cages reappear in the description of another work of art that plays such a crucial role in the representation of Sandhya's immigrant anxiety that it merits a mention at the very outset of the novel. When already in New York and traveling by subway, Sandhya notices a sculpture in the Union Square subway station that strikes a chord with her own feelings of non-belonging and displacement: "a cage of chicken wire guarding two twin sculptures, two metal chairs, bolted to the ground, their large proportions making them curiously childlike[.] The chairs were painted red and blue, their backs ornate in a fantasy of feeling" (5). Drawn by the magnetism of the piece, "Sandhya tried to put her hand through the chicken wire that protected the art work. She wanted to shove forward till she could sit. All she wanted to do was to sit ever so quietly, waiting. She wanted her feet soldered to the rough tiles"

8 For a detailed analysis of Ravi Varma's artistic career, see Chapter 5, titled "The Artist as a Charismatic Individual: Raja Ravi Varma," in Partha Mitter's *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*.

9 In her analysis of the symbolism of white color in the movie *Daughters of the Dust*, Susan Friedman makes an interesting observation that the donning of white clothes by women of color may be an example of what Homi Bhabha calls "colonial mimicry" (163). The concept is meant to denote "the imitative practices of the colonized whose adaptation of certain western modes undermines the ideology of 'natural' western superiority through a performance of constructivism" (Friedman 163).

(5). The chairs, painted the colors of the American flag and fastened securely to the ground, stand in Sandhya's mind for an unquestionable belonging in the United States. The fact that she is separated from the sculpture by a cage of chicken wire becomes symbolic of her unfulfilled longing to get inside, to belong within the human mosaic of America, to have her own feet "soldered" to the American ground. As Hepburn maintains in his study of the representations of art objects in literature, display always imposes some distance between the viewer and the artistic object, and the physical distance is oftentimes perceived by the viewer as a psychological distance as well (41). Hence, the sculpture represents to Sandhya everything she would like to be but is not: as it is, she feels insecure in her brown skin, barred from the entrance to the American mainstream and unable to form a sustainable identity. In other words, the metaphorical bridge leading to belonging in America turns out in Sandhya's case to be one "that seizes crossing" (221), as Sandhya's cousin, the poet Jay, puts it in one of his poems.

Sandhya's growing depression is situated against the backdrop of the cityscape. When she begins to gradually lose her senses, the urban landscape reflects the eerie quality of her mind as the cityscape becomes a sort of a canvas on which her psychotic mind draws images, predominantly the images of wings, symbolic of freedom she is incapable of achieving (Alexander, *Manhattan* 102). Following her failed suicide attempt in Draupadi's studio, Sandhya undergoes a lengthy process of healing, but the actual moment of her recovery is again situated against the backdrop of the cityscape. To be more precise, it occurs at the intersection of man-made and natural urban environment¹⁰ and it takes place in two stages: the first happening outside the Hunter art gallery, and the second in Central Park. Ready to enter the Hunter art gallery and looking at her reflection in the glass doors leading inside, Sandhya sees a dark shadow behind her:

As Sandhya moved her neck the shadow moved too, and then her arm, torso, thigh were all taken up in a quick step, a dark, marginal being basted to the reflection of moving flesh.... She was tempted. She should turn back, go down into that darkness, never come back.... Sandhya looked back at the glass window. It couldn't have been more than a moment or two, but the sun had moved behind a passing cloud. It was the angle of light, nothing more or less, but the shadow had vanished. And Sandhya Rosenblum stood there... staring at herself

¹⁰ See an interesting typology of various elements of the city, i.e. natural, built, human and verbal in Hana Wirth-Nesher's introductory chapter to her *City Codes: Reading a Modern Urban Novel*, 11–14.

in a bright mirror. There she was, intact and whole, no doubleness seizing her from behind. She felt the sunlight on her throat and relaxed, letting her feet increase their hold on a warm sidewalk. How long it would last she could not tell. Perhaps in a few months, a few years, it would all splinter¹¹ again, and she would be seized by unknown passions welling out of her flesh. But for now, she would be, she would let herself be. (214–215)

Unlike her alter ego Draupadi, Sandhya has never felt whole in the US for “[t]he borders she had crossed had marked her very soul” to make her “a tattooed thing” (74). She has even grown envious of her husband Stephen’s wholeness, symbolized by his knowledge and usage of only one language, American English. Sandhya feels whole for the first time in the US while looking inside through the glass doors, and it is not inside any building that she looks but inside a gallery. By definition, a gallery is a place that trades in images. Sandhya “buys” the image of herself reflected in the surface of the glass window and that image suggests wholeness and belonging. Her own reflection is superimposed on the image of the painting that is hung on the gallery wall, “a triangle of green paint signifying a mountain, a trickle of dull red down its flank” (214). Although the red trickle that Sandhya identifies as “a stream of rusty water” (214) draws attention due to its color so different from its background, it still remains part of the larger whole. She seems to understand that within the human composition of a place what stands out by virtue of its color is not necessarily outside but part of the whole. Armed with this knowledge, Sandhya feels her wish articulated at the subway station come partly true: her feet press hard into the sidewalk to become metaphorically “soldered” to the American ground. Her recovery becomes complete when, in Central Park, she takes off her sandals and walks into the lake, which for her becomes a manifestation of her belonging in the American metropolis. As the novel ends, Sandhya, feeling that “[t]here was a place for her here... walk[s] quickly into the waiting city” (228).

Sandhya’s feelings of lostness, generated by the experience of immigration, are contrasted in the novel with Draupadi’s syncretism and the ease with which she weaves her family’s real and imagined ethnic backgrounds into one whole, which is if not coherent then at least sustainable. Perhaps because she comes from a relatively homogenous family background, Sandhya cannot come to terms with the duality generated by the experience of crossing borders: “she feared she might die of the sheer transparency needed to be in two places at once”

11 In an interview she gave to Iwanaga and Srikanth, Alexander talked at length about the theme of splintered or splintering self that she explores in her poetry and fiction (“The Voice” 7).

(Alexander, *Manhattan* 95–96). Katrak in her analysis of Alexander’s writing calls such a state “the *simultaneity of geography*... the possibility of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination” (“South” 201, italics in the original). Sandhya’s name is itself symbolic of her precarious position of being poised between two cultures, able to fit neither here nor there: “In Sanskrit the name [Sandhya] signified those threshold hours, before the sun rose or set, fragile zones of change before the clashing absolutes of light and dark took hold” (Alexander, *Manhattan* 227).

Following her emigration from India Sandhya Rosenblum suffers from agitation generated by what she perceives as her inability to fit in America on account of her facial features, her clothing and her mannerisms. Her state of mind is similar to what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “a *mestiza* consciousness” (236). In her seminal essay titled “*La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*,” Anzaldúa defines *la mestiza* as “a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another”; finding herself “sandwiched between two cultures” *la mestiza* “undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (234). Anzaldúa further argues that “[t]he ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (234). Sandhya fits Anzaldúa’s definition of *la mestiza* perfectly,¹² and her restlessness, which leads to her depression and attempted suicide, is reflected in the fragmented, disjointed structure of Alexander’s novel. The main sections of the text are the six chapters titled “Sitting,” “Stirring,” “Going,” “Stoning,” “Turning” and “Staying.” The grammatical form of the gerund used in each of these one-verb titles is indicative of a certain movement or incompleteness of the action. Hence, the titles may be understood as corresponding to the development of the protagonist—from the anxiety of immigration through her nervous breakdown to a sense of relative security—in a movement that Alexander terms a “ceaseless metamorphosis of spirit” (*Manhattan* 132). The title of the last chapter, “Staying,” despite using the gerund form of the verb, suggests a degree of closure, as the act of staying presupposes the decision to stay that must have been taken before.

12 Parvinder Mehta argues that all the major female characters in *Manhattan Music*—Draupadi, Sandhya and her cousin Sakhi—correspond to Anzaldúa’s definition of *la mestiza* for “they learn to accept any ambiguities and transform themselves” (248). Yet, I would argue that the process is most vexed in the case of Sandhya, who is the only woman presented in the novel as undergoing what Anzaldúa’s calls “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (234), whereas the other two women—although undoubtedly representing hybrid identities—feel more secure with who they are.

The Language of Art

Meena Alexander's work, whether autobiographical or fictional, has always been preoccupied with the question of language, due to the author's own exposure to several languages throughout her life: her native Malayalam that she could speak but neither read nor write, Arabic heard all around her when she spent her childhood in Sudan and in which her first poems were published in translation though she was not able to read them herself, British English of her education, and, finally, American English. When asked about the importance of heteroglossia in an interview by Maxey, Alexander responded:

I have multiple languages working for me. But I have always grown up in a world where there were things one did not understand, because there were languages that were not completely accessible... it just gives you a particular sense of being in a world where you can be comfortable even though linguistically the world is not really knowable. (191–192)

Alexander's fictional characters likewise struggle with the limitations that language imposes on communication. As Katrak puts it, language is especially important for women as it can serve as "a coping mechanism" (*Politics* 207) in situations of powerlessness.

What happens then when language generates more problems than it solves, as in the case of Sandhya, who is not convinced that "varied languages... made one better equipped for life in a world of multiple anchorages such as New York presented" (Alexander, *Manhattan* 68)? Alexander suggests that in such cases another, extra-linguistic mode of expression must be found. For example, the heroine in her first novel *Nampally Road* discards English for the sake of "a communal dream language that allows women to express themselves, and escape from the boundaries of Western definitions" (Davé 110). In *Manhattan Music* this special language, a "dream language" that enables the characters to communicate their feelings freely, is the language of art. As Mehta claims, art "provides an emotional outlet to vent frustrations or anguish faced by the immigrants in this novel. Art is like a mirror reflecting multiple identities of the (immigrant) artist. The versatility of art in this novel reflects on the adaptive, dynamic, and even fluid quality of the immigrants living in America" (234).

The role of art is emphasized in the novel's structure. As has already been pointed out, the main sections of *Manhattan Music* are interspersed with brief chapters, a mere few pages long, narrated by Draupadi Dinkins and one chapter narrated by Jay, Sandhya's cousin, a photographer-turned-poet. These artist-narrated chapters, starting with the Overture and ending with the Coda give the novel a structure resembling that of a musical composition, with Draupadi's chapters

playing the role of leitmotif. Music, it must be remembered, is also evoked in the title of the novel and seems always to be playing in the background, even though it is not paid as much attention to as other forms of art, including performance, photography or poetry. The title of the novel may also refer to the sounds of the streets, which Sandhya interprets as “curious, atonal music” (78), or it may denote the people who live in Manhattan and form the human mosaic of New York, comparable to the components of a musical composition. The—somewhat overoptimistic—lesson that Sandhya learns at the end of the novel is that although people, like instruments, sound different, they all have a place and a role to play within the composition of New York and America as such. The apparent naivety of such a conclusion stems from the fact that Sandhya has never fallen victim to racial oppression and her struggle has been of an inner, rather than outer, character. In view of that, the utopian vision of New York as a place welcoming to all is what helps her accept herself as a rightful member of America.

As argued in this essay, Meena Alexander in *Manhattan Music* deploys several interwoven discourses to express the multivalent experience of border crossings. For one thing, she frames her account of Sandhya’s fraught identity in spatial terms, showing literal movement through space, from India to America, to be a crucial factor bearing upon the construction of identity. To complicate and enrich her portrayal of immigrant sensibility Alexander opens up the metaphorical space of artistic creation, which serves as a mirror of the anxious immigrant’s troubled mind. Art also functions in the novel as a political tool used to raise people’s awareness about the history of racial oppression and to forge coalitions among various groups of people of color. Finally, art is presented as a form of language which is universal in its accessibility to all and which enables an expression of an unrestricted range of meanings. To conclude, the novel thus seems to show that “a bridge that seizes crossing” can after all be crossed through art.

Works cited

- Alexander, Meena. *Fault Lines: A Memoir*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1993. Print.
- . Interview by Ruth Maxey. *The Kenyon Review* 28.1 (Winter 2006): 187–194. Print.
- . “Introduction. The Voice That Passes through Me: An Interview with Meena Alexander.” By Esther Iwanaga and Rajini Srikanth. *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*. Ed. Rajini Srikanth and Esther Y. Iwanaga. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001. 3–9. Print.
- . *Manhattan Music*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1997. Print.
- . “The Poet in the Public Sphere: A Conversation with Meena Alexander.” By Lopamudra Basu. *Social Text* 72 20.3 (Fall 2002): 31–38. Print.

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness." *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 233–247. Print.
- Bahri, Deepika, and Mary Vasudeva. "Observing Ourselves among Others: Interview with Meena Alexander." *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Ed. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 35–53. Print.
- Chu, Patricia P. *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Print.
- Davé, Shilpa. "The Doors to Home and History: Post-colonial Identities in Meena Alexander and Bharati Mukherjee." *Amerasia Journal* 19.3 (1993): 103–113. Print.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Print.
- Grewal, Gurleen. "Indian-American Literature." *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage*. Ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996. 91–108. Print.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.
- Grice, Helena. *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. Print.
- Hepburn, Allan. *Enchanted Objects: Visual Art in Contemporary Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Print.
- Katrak, Ketu H. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Print.
- . "South Asian American Literature." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-kok Cheung. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 192–218. Print.
- Mahabharata, The, of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*. Trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli. 1883–1896. 17 Feb. 2014. Web.
- McDowell, Linda. "Spatializing Feminism: Geographic Perspectives." *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. Ed. Nancy Duncan. London: Routledge, 1996. 28–44. Print.
- Mehta, Parvinder. "When the Fragmented Self Remembers and Recovers: Transfiguring the Past and Identities through Memory in *Manhattan Music*." *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*. Ed. Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenarts. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 232–249. Print.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*." *Art and the Public Sphere*. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 29–48. Print.
- Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
- Moka-Dias Brunda. "Meena Alexander." *Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Emanuel S. Nelson. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000. 1–7. Print.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989. Print.
- . *Wife*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975. Print.

- Shankar, Lavina Dhingra, and Rajini Srikanth. "South Asian American Literature: 'Off the Turnpike' of Asian America." *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. 370–387. Print.
- Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. Print.
- Taibbi, Mike, and Anna Sims-Phillips. *Unholy Alliances: Working the Tawana Brawley Story*. New York: Harcourt, 1989. Print.
- Tapping, Craig. "South Asia Writes North America: Prose Fictions and Autobiographies from the Indian Diaspora." *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992. 285–301. Print.
- Wirth-Nesher, Hana. *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.
- Young, Katherine K. "Women and Hinduism." *Women in Indian Religions*. Ed. Arvind Sharma. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 3–37. Print.