

# IDENTIFICATION OF SELF IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S ILLITERATE HEART

Priyanka Banerjee <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D Research Scholar, University Department of English, Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad, India



Received 16 May 2025  
Accepted 18 June 2025  
Published 21 July 2025

DOI  
[10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i6.2025.6266](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i6.2025.6266)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

Meena Alexander is a towering figure in the area of Indian English literature. She has attained popularity by dwelling upon the themes of space and dislocation in her poems. She has created great works of literature by speaking of her intense feelings of loneliness, homesickness, nostalgia and remembrance. One of her most acclaimed works is a collection of poems called *Illiterate Heart* for which she was even awarded the PEN Open Book Award in the year 2002. The book has sophisticatedly touched the journey of a woman through colonial and patriarchal didactics. Meena Alexander has vividly illustrated her the formation of a feminine language to expose the painful disconnection between the body and the soul. Alexander has even persisted upon the plight of the Indians during the Post colonial period and has reflected upon her memorable experiences of her childhood in India. The book has historical references of various freedom movements that had led India to her Independence in the year 1947.

This research paper has tried to identify the various aspects of the major poems of the book that have made Meena Alexander a poet par excellence and has created an urge in every reader to go back to one's own native place and being surrounded by their near and dear one's.

**Keywords:** Space, Dislocation, Nostalgia, Patriarchal Didactics, Homesickness, Disconnection, Body and Soul

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Illiterate Heart* is a collection of poems with the intense feeling of oscillation between the themes of familiar and foreign [Lidia and Jayanthi \(2020\)](#). The poems have also moved between multiple languages, present-day experience and memory, and two worlds. Dislocation of the author is the main theme and content of the book that has explored intimate connections of the soul of the poet to both America and India. Fascination is present all over the book in every poem through multiple languages and imageries that connect the readers with contradictory geographies, feelings, and thoughts simultaneously. Everything has changed in the life of the author, and every thought has been presented in minute details. The poem and the poet have created a powerful bonding of celebration and grief together with silence and speech in a balanced manner [Varanasi \(2018\)](#). Clear view of the present and past is the most crucial part of the book of the poems that have connected the isolation, exile, and feelings of women together. This aspect has affected the entire

procedure of presenting the main value of the work by focusing on the presentation of the themes that can affect the intention of readers.

## 2. DISCUSSION

The poet has shown her continuous growth in childhood and adulthood with the theory of life and her own philosophy on events she has witnessed, languages, and landscapes. Entire book has beautifully weaved the experiences in a beautiful and fierce way when it comes to show her feelings and thoughts in her open verse. This sophisticated literary production of Meena Alexander has raised the theoretical questions through the unresolved problems regarding challenges in self-development, female body, and construction of feminine gender. The book contains the unceasing love of the poet for her father as she has dedicated the book to the memory of her loving father [Dash \(2019\)](#). Reader-friendly approach has helped her readers to stay connected with the memories of the writer. She is here to provide an extremely controlled and confident journey to her readers by helping them to connect their emotions with the poet. She also gets support from her readers with a smile on their face after completing any study.

She has acknowledged the effort of her father in her education and growth as a poet. Even in this place, the migrancy of her father has been presented in an unprecedented way. Along with that, she has questioned the speech and fury of immigrants. However, she has also provided the answer to the questions through the experience of her entire journey with the help of the works of renowned writers. No uncertain terms are used in the book that can offend any feeling or thought of the readers. It has already prepared the readers for the next step and the entire work by focusing on the journey of her life. Paradox is missing from the work along with processing and producing information radically. It has also been identified that homeland is a very important aspect of the book of the poem that has helped in exploring the urge from the end of the poet by explaining the importance of guidance from her muse.

Memory is the most important aspect of presenting the flute and music to present her heart from the time when she was a child. Her poems have arranged loss and grief in her life. She has mixed entirely different two worlds in her poems that have helped her in presenting the concept of foreign and familiarity [Sarkar and Haque \(2018\)](#).

It is the thinking from the poet and the audience that connect them with each other, and the book presents the beautiful sequence of staying apart in front of the homeland and getting the feelings back with a published approach of helping everyone. The author finds the language difficult in the starting days of her lessons [Lidia and Jayanthi \(2020\)](#). She has explored many dimensions of learning, feeling, and memory in her book through the memory of her father, learning English, Sudan, and her later life. In the poem named "Port Sudan" of this book, she has presented her thoughts regarding her parents. Her father knew very well that she needs to learn different languages, and the knowledge has helped her to grow with the passing time. At the same time, it has also helped her to grow with the fury in mind and nature to survive as immigrants.

When it comes to the style of the collection of the poems it is filled with a contemporary style of open and free verse. However, her poetries are refined and rich with the greatness of feelings and thoughts from different aspects of life [Kushwaha \(2019\)](#). For example, in the first poem she has presented the theme of the entire book along with the surprises for her audience. In other poems such as Muse,

she has shown the inner self and part of the poet with a clear view regarding her life. Language is the theme even in this poem that has shown her interests in multiple linguistics approaches in her life. Her journey as an exile was not easy, and she has not forgotten the sacrifices of every woman and exile individual in this poem.

Most importantly, she has focused on presenting her feelings and ideas of the life she has spent. The title poem of the book has also presented the clearest aspects of life that can help every person in being better in their lives. Although she has used a contemporary form of writing it has not made any course through the poetry book. On the other hand, the poems of the book have nourished and cherished the idea of learning something new that can help people to be born in a new manner. It is not possible for readers to separate themselves while reading these poems that have reminded the readers of renowned literary giants of the past Kurtz, Marlow, and Conrad. She has presented her love for literature and language in a simple way that has attracted everyone towards the sharp aspects of linguistics with a fine presentation of language. Hence, lyrical achievement is no less important in the book that has helped the poet in showing the grip of other Indian Poets who have influenced her writing. Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Das are other contemporary poets who have shown their diasporas approaches towards the language and love for literature.

Meena Alexander is no different in the field of South Asian Poets who have worked on presenting their life as a craft to provide a meaning and life to the art. Poetry is the most significant part of life that has helped individuals to live a better life. Life is poetry that is woven with different events and people who do not write poetries find solace in such works that reflect their life. Most importantly, the cultural aspects, the lifestyle in the past, the colonialism, and the love of life have made the poetries bold.

This collection is rich with poems such as “Black River Walled Garden” and “Giving Names to Stones” and “She Hears a Gold Flute” is full of memories and happiness. It has also been identified that this book has also acknowledged the contribution of her father in her life. She has not forgotten her early days with her father and her ways to go to him and find solace in his memory [Rustomji-Kerns and Sharma \(2018\)](#). Her fragmented sentences, questions, and the answers have presented a unique idea for the people of this place along with providing the best idea regarding furies of immigrants.

Meena Alexander is a renowned name in the diaspora-related works of literature, and she wrote two novels named Nampally Road and Manhattan Music. Every book of Meena Alexander has presented the importance of the difference between the childhood and adulthood experience. Fault Lines was published in 1993, and the book was one of the best books from Publishers Weekly. The book has worked on presenting the themes of reaching a self-definition that can help the entire world become aware regarding the closing of work. The poet has presented her thoughts on the procedure of the journey she has covered all through her life [Kushwaha \(2019\)](#). It is not possible for anyone to present the thoughts in a specific area without having support from the achievements of Indian poets without working on the way of life. The upbringing of the poet has also been presented in minute detail along with the aspects of discrimination when it comes to managing lyrical poetry without discriminating against the world of art.

A later poem of Alexander is “Birthplace with Buried Stones” that also presented the memory and history of the world. Unsettling aspects of the world and history through violence have been presented and clearly explained in the globalised world. This poet has stressed on poetry to stay on this earth and

memorise our history. History does not die with the passing time as poetry gives it support to live more. Diverse poems and writers have become the centrepiece of the concerns of the poems. She has presented her experience in every book she has written. Innocence is also present in every poem that has helped in knowing the reflection of the strengths from renowned authors from India. She has a similarity with her contemporary poets born in India and worked in America such as Agha Shahid Ali with two renowned collections of poetry *Rooms* are [Never Finished \(2001\)](#) and *call me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003). Homelessness is the key aspect of his poetries that remind the loss of his life along with providing a deem reflection of the Poems of Meena Alexander with the quest for living in her memories.

Vijay Seshadri is another renowned name of the contemporary writers of Meena Alexander with a collection of poems such as *Wild Kingdom* that has presented the intelligence in him along with devotion and suffering from the life that have also included consciousness. Delightful and profound works of this writer have also reminded the poems from Alexander with a conversational tone. He has also worked on the mythology of India, and presented poems based on Mahabharata. However, Vijay Sheshadri has not presented his origin or talked about his childhood in most of his poems [Kushwaha \(2019\)](#). Kamala Das is a renowned name in the confessional poetry of Indo-Anglian poets. Her poetries are comparable with American poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who have sought love and freedom from the aspect of universal sufferings. Courageous nature and truthfulness of Kamala Das have made her the poet of confession, and she has clearly influenced Meena Alexander when it comes to working on the childhood memories along with confessing the truth before the world regarding female gender and female body.

These poets have only created a strong bonding with women by collecting sufficient courage to express the unspeakable realities of lives of women. From that aspect, Kamala Das has influenced Meena Alexander in gaining courage to express the way she thinks about the memories along with her feelings [Peeradina \(2020\)](#). Free form of the poets has helped the reader to connect themselves with the poetries along with expressing their love for those words. Formation of identity through multiple languages and the imageries has made it easy for the entire team to work on the different aspects criticising the institutionalisation of contemporary India. Conditions of colonisation and patriarchy have worked on the factors such as reading imageries in the poem to create different dimensions in the working process [Kushwaha \(2019\)](#). It has also been identified that the role of poetry and language is no less important in presenting the personal identification and nature of exile.

Along with that, other collections of the same poet such as *Raw Silk* have presented her extremely intellectual part through a clear blend of uncertain terms. She has mixed the mirror of earth from different cultures, languages, rituals, and religions to gain success in staying safe. In her poems she has mixed the characters of Draupadi, Demeter, Iphigenia, and Sita to express the feelings of her mind on the procedure of meeting the expectations of people. Innocence is the central theme of the book that has revolved around the different approaches towards powerlessness of artists and poets to fight the political aspects. However, the poets go beyond anxiousness and fear of homelessness.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The author has presented the thinking and power of her generation. She has also shown the importance of belongingness and the presence of her father that have helped her to fight even in foreign countries. She has also become successful in presenting the thoughts from her end with the never-ending bonding between the grief and celebration for the pain. It has also been identified in the review that the mostly used themes of the book include navigation of multiple languages, twofold tyranny of colonisation, and pedagogy of patriarchy.

The author has presented the importance of the controlling authorities in the earlier work of the poet when it comes to managing the entire procedure of meeting the expectations of the reader by presenting her memories. Readers can connect themselves in the resemblance of working together. Exile person and female gender are the two aspects that have got the priority in the book in the form of the childhood and adulthood memes. Hence, memories are the most important aspect in this book that has been presented in minute details. Comfort in the sentences and words of the poet have soothed the heart of the readers by connecting with them from the heart. Feelings and thoughts of the author have been spread all over the discriminating aspects of the work. Along with that, the review has compared the other works of the same writer along with the other writers in contemporary time. It is worth mentioning that even after being a contemporary collection of books the author has used a refined language to portray the memory. On the other hand, unceasing inventive approach of the book has affected the success of the poet by connecting her to the readers.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

### REFERENCES

- Dash, A. (2019). Representing Racism in the Postcolonial World: A Narrative Presentation by Meena Alexander in Fault Lines. *Submission Guidelines and Subscription*, 15, 32–40.
- Kushwaha, P. (2019). Meena Alexander's Poetry: A Reflection of the Thoughts of Gandhi.
- Lidia, M. S. R., & Jayanthi, M. M. (2020). The Rhetoric of Cultural Symbolism in Meena Alexander's Quickly Changing River.
- Peeradina, S. (2020). Meena Alexander: In Praise of Fragments. *World Literature Today*, 94(2), 80–81. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2020.0161>
- Rustomji-Kerns, R., & Sharma, R. (2018). Meena Alexander. In *Living in America* (pp. 85–90). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499159-21>
- Sarkar, S., & Haque, A. (2018). The Home and Identity: A Postcolonial Journey in the Poems of Meena Alexander. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijll.v5n3p23>
- Valladares, M. Y. (2019). Remembering Meena Alexander. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 47(1 & 2), 279–286. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.2019.0029>

Varanasi, U. P. (2018). Women Solidarity and Sorority in the Poetry of Meena Alexander. In Anish Kumar Verma (Ed.), (p. 44).