



## **Women in Transcultural Space: A Study of Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines* and Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days***

**Shrabanti Kundu**

PhD Student, Centre for Diaspora Studies, Central University of Gujarat

The author is pursuing her PhD at Centre for Diaspora Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar. Her areas of interest are Diaspora Literature, Feminist Criticism, Autobiography, Theatre & Film Criticism.

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the transcultural experience of women. It attempts to understand, analyse and trace the condition of woman migrants in different spaces and their assertion of such, accounting not only that phase of their life but the whole life itself. Narrating the construction of self in life writing, in regard of both utilising and despising transcultural space, is modelled in the study through the analysis of two autobiographies, *Fault Lines* and *Meatless Days* by Meena Alexander and Sara Suleri respectively. Diaspora studies usually locate the dilemma of place, citizenship, language, culture but in recent studies the gender constrains have been added to this problem of positionality. Therefore, the study has tried to present the woman’s self-representation, migration and displacement and the development or construction of self of women and identity in a new country. Moreover, for this purpose, autobiography has provided a concrete ground where women themselves articulate their story or life journey with all their struggles. Through this articulation of ‘self’, women break the specific gender roles, and create space for self-representation and deny all kinds of restrictions.

### **Keywords**

Transcultural space, self, migration, identity

Diaspora writing emerged as a result of socio-cultural changes encountered by people or by individuals, once they have migrated to the new land. In this context, life writing provides a subjective detailing of space, gender, home and even history, in terms of nation along with different political affairs. The colonial history brings a drastic change in the concept of home and space, evidently in the system of indentured migration, and its reflection of pain and trauma of living for a period or lifetime in an unknown land. The autobiographies that we have come across regarding indentured migration, for example *Jeevan Prakash* (trans. *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer*, 2006) by Munshi Rahman Khan shows the above concern. In the postcolonial era, people have migrated to different places due to various reasons. The increase in social mobility due to political, social and individual reasons has changed the meaning of geographical boundaries in the present world. Literature is not excluded from the effect of these migrations, as it also observes the upheavals in the construction of individual identity in a new land. As people are being gradually exposed to other culture, language and practice, the purity of their own culture they retain with them gets affected. This cultural mix in the practical ground opens up a new horizon in the diaspora literature.

This paper focuses on the transcultural experience of women self. Transculture, the expression proposes affiliation beyond national culture or a singular culture. Generally, we associate transculture with movements of people from one place to another place, called elsewhere as displacement. 'Transculture', the word moreover suggests an in-between condition of a person who experiences two or more cultural impact. When the discussion of diaspora comes into consideration, the mixing or experiencing of more than one culture becomes a common phenomenon. This contact zone of cultures provides a space for the migrant people, which in some ways help them to articulate their own existence. Utilisation of that space in the canon of literature, where the cultural influence is dominant, is a pertinent subject. This paper argues how the narrator expresses upheavals in cultural fluctuation in the self-narrative. With this issue, the position of women in the transcultural space too is needed to be judged. Women, best regarded as the bearer of the values of a culture, experience this cultural mixing as a place of subordination. Thus, the experience gathered by women on transcultural motive and narrating that in the form of self-expression is here dealt in respect of two autobiographies written by female writers.

Janice Kulyk Keefer describes 'transculture' as a manner or practice, where the dominant culture is encountered with the larger culture. Literature, expressing this

cultural contact, foregrounds the experiences of 'minority' where the dominant culture of homeland is fading due to the practices of host land. Even in many ways, minority groups create a boundary around them in creating a comfort zone of their own and maintain a difference with the larger culture (13-16). However, the culture has its own flow that is not to be prevented, and thus, influence or effect of one culture upon another is a usual matter. Transcultural writing enunciates a kind of circulation of vision, and exchange of ideas between different cultural groups. Even this kind of writing promotes an exchange between the dominant and minority, centre and margin.

The displacement for an individual leads her/him to acknowledge a new space. This new experience is usually caught in recognising the new acquaintances which come to realise the change. The experience of transculture has, now a days, become a common phenomenon because of globalisation. In this era of globalisation, there is no such fixed identity of people, place, goods or materials and knowledge transmission, that all achieve a global attention now. The lack of fixity, in a way, intensifies the felling of distance from one's own possessions (culture, land) as well as it creates a fear of mingling to other entity. It is understood as fear of mingling with the other culture, which happens initially for all migrants. The understanding of this transcultural experience comes gradually after realizing the difference - from self to other, nation to other nation.

Now, when it is about realising the transcultural experience for a constructive argument to be built upon it, the experience can be understood with the help of memory, with growing gap in time, and with the space that a critical perceiver needs, away from either her/his home or the new place where she/he is positioned now. Thus, while this experience is said to be a normal proceeding that happens in accounting new circumstances, it usually suppresses different aspects of self. But, when this perceiving of transculture comes to self-writing, preconceptions and suppressions are made to reflect through incidents and facts which negotiate with identity. The diasporic authors or migrant writers make this a site of their writing where they try to commemorate their old acquaintances. The fictionalized form of their own life stories get reflected in the transcultural space and with their understanding of the cultural change, the narratives become more acceptable to the readers. The writing comes into prominence through memory; and memorising the incidents become a place of self-reflection in literature. The issues of identity, existence, alienation, nostalgia all come through the life incidents of the migrant writers. With this projection of incidents, the idea of 'self' becomes prominent in their writing.

This paper attempts to understand, analyse and trace the condition of woman migrants in different spaces and their assertion of such, accounting not only that phase of their life but the whole life itself. Narrating the construction of self in life writing, in regard of both utilising and despising transcultural space, is modelled in the study through the analysis of two autobiographies, *Fault Lines* and *Meatless Days* by Meena Alexander and Sara Suleri respectively. Diaspora studies usually locate the dilemma of place, citizenship, language, culture but in recent times the gender constrains have been added to this problem of positionality. Therefore, the study has tried to present the woman's self-representation, migration and displacement and the development or construction of self of women and identity in a new country. Moreover, for this purpose, autobiography has provided a concrete ground where women themselves articulate their story or life journey with all their struggles. Through this articulation of 'self', women break the specific gender roles and create space for self-representation and deny all kinds of restrictions.

The 'double consciousness' (Dayal 47) of the diasporic community is represented in their writings as it is desirous to represent the reality of migration. This community posits a critical relationship with both the home and host land, presumably the homeland ties and the host land position; and this in-betweenness situation is depicted in various modes of its representations. Transcultural space provides the author a new angle towards the society from where she/he can have an objective outlook towards her/himself. Thus, it is not only a mixing but also a formation of identity and a space to write her/his own tale. Cultures, then, do not remain a monolithic units or an individualistic practice, but are supposed to be a hybridized formation in a continuous debate with one another. In that case, it is easier to detach literatures from its national, territorial and ethnic belonging. More importantly, the transcultural perception tries to overcome the limits of acquaintance that the scholars find in postcolonial and multicultural approaches. Even, due to the increase of human mobilisation, the feminist critics understood and analysed the concept of space with relation to its situatedness, 'positionality of dispersal' (Brah 201), culture and identity.

Literature creates a new horizon in discussing diaspora and diasporic sensibility. It gives a whole new account of the migration and related issues, in a manner where home and host lands are amalgamated as one. In the world of literature, autobiography becomes a mode of communication with the new world of experience. The narratives draw the transcultural proficiency through the genre of autobiography, where the writer reflects her/his own experience. In this, genre, memory and nostalgia interlink and generate a

space where old and new world comes closer. In the women's autobiography, the discovery of 'self' apparently becomes the discovery of female identity. Autobiography thus suggests a means of survival; seeking freedom from this patriarchal setup, stereotypical presentation and gender role expected by society.

*Fault Lines* is a memoir by Meena Alexander where she describes her journey from her childhood to a writer in maturity and her trajectories as an immigrant and other experiences in her life. It is an account of her life story along with brief account of her family members and their importance in her self-development. This memoir in various sections reflects her sensibility towards her past life and migration. Even the sections are named after her self-realization of different accounts, evidently as 'Dark Mirror', 'Kerala Childhood', 'Crossing Borders', 'Language and Shame', 'Long Fall', 'Narrow Gate' etc. In the text, she hardly maintains any chronology of events. The text has its own flow of narration as Alexander reflects her self-realisation.

*Fault Lines* opens with Alexander's childhood in Kerala. She narrates it from a very early age, when she was accustomed with travel and has spent her childhood in Kuruvila and Kozencheri alternatively. She mentions that her initial stages of learning came up with her grandfather in Tiruvella. She narrates her attachment with her grandfather and the pain of departing from him. Moreover, she talks about her migration to Sudan and the new cultural and geographical experiences encountered there. Even, the language of English, that she knew already, is introduced to her with new eloquence. She, in this context, gives an account of her English teacher, Mrs McDermott, who always compelled her to repeat words for correct pronunciation. She says, "The trouble was, I knew the word already but in different way. And she tries her level best to polish out my Indian English and replace it with the right model" (Alexander 112). Thus, migration in her life not only brings change in terms of place but it also brings in her a change in practice.

Apart from her childhood experiences, she also writes about her grandmother Kanju with her struggle as a woman in pre-independent India. As she had a strong interest in learning and studying that she achieved also, helped her resisting the social impositions upon women. Even after her marriage, she enjoys a great engagement in social cause, usually breaking gender constructs in the society. On the contrary, Alexander's mother believes in restriction upon women to a certain extent. She does not appreciate woman's socio-political involvements rather considers these as the cause of ignorance towards family and children. She encourages the household dealing of woman as she tells

Alexander, “If you ever marry and if you have ever children, always remember that your role is to be there at the side, at home. It would be wrong for you to take a job. Remember that, Meena, a woman’s place is at home, by her family” (Alexander 14). Even, she tried to educate her daughters very nominally. Alexander mentions this contradiction, which helps her to construct her own ‘self’.

It is mentioned earlier that her narratives encounter her multiple migrations thus, her sensibility also gets affected by that. For educational purpose, she latter migrated to London despite her mother’s unwillingness. Her mother did not want her to send to a foreign land all alone. She wanted her to take admission in any Indian university but as Alexander writes, “Madras University refused to accept a degree from Khartoum University ... London University would accept the Khartoum degree, but not Madras” (Alexander 135), and she left for England. But during the years in Britain, she remained disturbed due to loneliness. She realises that this country is not her own, she only studies here, attends late night parties, but all were a part of duty alone. Thus, she narrates that crossing of national border creates a crisis within her; and she is not able to identify herself in that space.

Another aspect of the text is language. Because of her migration to different countries, language becomes a major concern for her. As she is acquainted with Malayalam, Hindi, English, Arabic and French, she narrates the difficulty in dealing with multiple language in a cross-cultural situation. She, in the text, accepts her inappropriateness in terms of her mother tongue. She is not able to retain the language of her childhood – both Malayalam and Arabic, and now she writes in English. For this, Alexander gives a detailed account of her quest in terms of language. She narrates that as an Indian woman, she wants to retain her homeland identity and language through writing, and tries to do the same in her life. Even because of her link with the Arabic language, she published her poem, translated by her friend, in Arabic newspaper in Khartoum. She regrets that she is not able to read and write either Arabic or Malayalam but only can understand, because of her childhood acquaintances with the same. Further, she argues that the language English has become a burden because of the colonial rule in India and has gained more importance over native languages.

As the narration progresses, the complex relation between migration and womanhood becomes insoluble to her. She narrates her marriage in context of migration to the USA. She travels many a times there but after marriage, she settles down in New York. Marriage, as she admits, is not only a new engagement but also a way for reaching

to the ethos, approached by her mother. It is a new phase, which can “stitch me [*her*] back into the shared world” (Alexander 210). She says:

The only way I had been able to make my way back into this house, into this family, as by marrying and having children. Somewhere at the back of my mind when I had married David, the thought had raised, like a dim, somewhat suffocating mist: yes, this is a man from another country, not what they would really want, but now you can go home, you can face your parents. (208)

After she marries David, who is a historian on Indian civilisation, she immigrates to New York and has a multitude of experiences in migration. She describes America as a place of immigrants where every person retains her/his own self and deals with the society on a common ground. She not only gives an account of her marriage but also draws a contrast between the experience of her and her mother regarding marriage. Her experience of motherhood and the dilemma in a new land regarding her duties towards her children are also narrated. Even, in this perspective, her self-realisation comes through the comparing of her past and present events, between her mother and her, which becomes a prominent theme. She also mentions about her children, Adam and Svati Mariam. Motherhood for her is a transitional phase in her life. She mentions the issues raised by the second-generation migrants through the tales of her son and daughter. Alexander narrates how it opened up a new horizon to them, when her children went to India and identifies some of the account told by their mother. She on one occasion thus tells how her son was not willing to leave Kerala.

In the last section of the text, namely ‘Book of Childhood’, she gives her own reflection to each of event of her life. She tries to point out her childhood in India and Sudan. Moreover, she lays emphasis on memory and dreams. As she accounts, “There was a small pool of water in the courtyard fringed by ferns and orchids, and a mulberry tree as in grandfather Kuruvilla’s house, with tiny sleeping silkworms” (309). Her love for home is very prominent in her writing. The island (the US) where she lives at present becomes for her a ‘broken place’ (310). Thus, her narration always shifts towards feeling alone in an unknown land. Her life narration comes to an end with a desire to tear the mask of migration and wants to wear the delicate “silk stitched with shadow work in rose, violet and green” (317), where she can be her own self.

The other text, *Meatless Days*, by Sara Suleri is surrounded with political and social connotations. It records the geographical and cultural dislocation due to political

reasons as well as the upheavals in cultural practices. Not only the text has a political importance but it also accounts Sara Suleri's memories of her family and her protest against the female subjugation. Suleri's seminal years in Pakistan made her confront with most turbulent phases of her country. Within that turbulence, she tries to recognise the problematic issues of gender, religion and migration to a new society. She further explores in her memoir, the scenario of social order where culture, religion and social norms are used to exploit the conditions of women.

Suleri's memory of her life in *Meatless Days* travels through time and space as it confronts past life with present and make a contrast between the condition in living in Lahore and U.S.A. Suleri made a distinct form in linear detailing of events as she declares, "I have washed my hands of sequence" (76). The text in our consideration is divided into nine chapters, which she dedicates to each person of her acquaintance, for example, it contains the stories of Suleri's parents, her grandmother, sisters (Ifat, Nuz and Tillat) and friends (Fawzi, Anita and Dale). This kind of categorisation creates a relational self for her as Seyla Benhabib suggests:

Others are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also the tellers of their own stories, which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative. Narratives cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of the narratives of others; the sense that I create for myself is always immersed in a fragile 'web' of stories that I as well as others spin. (Quoted in Karlsson 129)

This is indicated in the titles of each chapter, as she writes "Mustakori, My Friend: A Study of Perfect Ignorance", "Goodbye to the Greatness of Tom", "The Immoderation of Ifat", "What Mama Knew", or "Papa and Pakistan" (Suleri v) etc.

In this life narrative, she talks about her father, a journalist who is deeply engaged in Pakistan's politics; her mother, a Welsh woman and a professor; her sister Ifat; and her friend Mostakhori, a self-sufficient girl and her brother Shahid. The narrative opens with Suleri's assertion of herself, an uprooted being, as she writes, "Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women" (1). She further develops the idea of women in the context of Pakistan, throughout the text. She concludes, 'there is no woman in the third world' (20), as if women are not supposed to have any right of their own not even to be considered as a part of the social structure. Suleri in her narrative introduces plenty of female characters of her relation. She speaks about her Dadi who is

somewhat adamant in nature who posits herself outside the concept of postcolonial women (as free minded or may say ‘new woman’). Dadi, when she was sixteen, married a Rajput who was three times older than she was. Her past memories faded into some oblivion as she did not remember her husband’s occupation nor do how many children did she produce, even she did forget the country to which her son migrated. In 1947, during the partition of India, she came to the recently created nation and Suleri comments, “moved her thin pure Urdu into the Punjab of Pakistan” (2). Suleri moves then to her Dadi’s love towards food. The perceptive conflicts between her Dadi and her mother in terms of rituals and belief have been discussed. In the text, meantime, Suleri talks about her childhood events and mentions her brothers and sisters. Suleri efficiently writes, actually she tries to avoid, the description of her sister Ifat’s death, is the most touching and painful incident. She recalls her childhood with Ifat when they used to play together. Thus, Suleri mentions:

When I woke in the morning, I would slowly think, I wonder we will play today, and before I was properly awake, Ifat would be upon me, shaking me to action: “you’re Belinda and Shahid’s Pepito and I’m Diana”; “you’re Gray Rabbit and Shahid is Mole and I’m the Cab”. (136)

Even in their teen age, Ifat supposed to be the protector of Sara, as Ifat assures her “if any one hurts you, Sara, make sure you tell me who it is, so that I can kill them, slowly” (Suleri 138). She was a girl of great sprit. In the conservative Pakistani society, she eloped with Javed and called up home to inform that she was married. Ifat marries Javed, a polo-playing Pakistani, and tries to devote herself in becoming a companion of her husband. Immediately, Suleri turns to the elegiac incident of Ifat’s death, “Ifat killed in the consuming rush of change and disbanded the company of women of all time” (18). It is hard for Suleri to admit the death of her beloved sister.

Next, she introduces her other sister Tillat who is now settled with her husband in Kuwait. Tillat is her younger sister and always remains with Sulei in difficult times; even at the time of Ifat’s death, she remains as a moral support for Sara. Suleri in the text also mentions the food imageries, which symbolises the cultural root as well as the past through one incident when Tillat comes to New Heaven to meet her. Suleri writes about their conversation as Tillat reveals the secret of *kapuras*, which Suleri knew as sweet breads, but Tillat tells her that they are actually testicles. Moreover, due to the cultural mix of her mother’s Welsh-ness and the food of Pakistan, this confusion emerged for her. The conflict of belonging to one’s native is presented.

Although, not in a chronology, she puts many important events in the history of Pakistan in her life narrative. Her father Z. A. Suleri, a teacher at the University of Punjab and his involvement in the politics of Pakistan is also discussed. In 1945, he travelled to England for promoting “Pakistan Cause in the capital city of Europe” (115). During this period, he got married for second time with a Welsh lady. In 1947, during the partition of India, he returned to his native land and witnessed the bewildering situation there. Next, Suleri describes the migration of her mother as a married Welsh to Pakistan, one of the most important issues in the text. She, due to her husband’s claim nominally accepted Islam, but remained an outsider in her husband’s home for her non-acceptance of this different culture and its troops. In an entire chapter, Suleri narrates the tale of her mother’s migration and cultural displacement.

Apart from the women characters in the text, Suleri also talks about her brother and father. Shahid is her younger brother. She and Shahid both experienced the migration during their childhood due to the political turmoil at that period. However, after their stay in Lahore for five years, Shahid moved to England and for many years, they did not meet each other. Suleri is relating the dispersion of her and her siblings with a tone of lamentation. She tries to retreat in her past and thus says to her brother, “it was not fair, I knew, but when we met, I needed him to talk to me as from a wellspring of euphoria” (103) as if the seed of happiness is grounded in her childhood with her family. Due to their childhood intimacy, they share a common understanding of homeland and foreign country. Suleri remarks:

For yes, of course, there is history for us in England, but certainly not of the press-clanking, deadline-demanding sort that kept us trotting from one town to town throughout our childhood to the extent that not one of us today would ever claim we miss the texture of newsprint. (105)

In her description of her brother, she somehow narrates the growth of her brother in Pakistani society, with women around her. Thus, the dilemma of culture as well as belongingness is projected through his projection in the text.

Suleri discusses about her father who was a writer and has his own paper, *Evening Times*. His first wife was a Pakistan woman, whom Suleri called Baji and they had a daughter called Nuzhat. After his migration to England, he married to Mair Jones, a Welsh woman and had three daughters and two sons. His life was full of struggles and shocking incidents. Firstly, he witnessed his daughter Ifat’s rebellious act of marriage and his wife’s death. Then he also witnessed his daughter Ifat’s death in an accident. After

this, he became alone as his sons and daughters reside outside the country. He adopted a girl in order to overcome his solitude and named her Shahida. It is though shocking that instead of re-marrying; he adopted a daughter to overcome his loneliness. He retired from *Pakistan Times* and left his book, *Boys Will Be Boys*, unfinished due to his nervous quirk, which years later re-written by Sara herself.

Through each and every events as well as characters in *Meatless Days*, she introspects towards her inner self. Sitting in New Haven (America), she writes her story and often retreats her memory to her native land for the sake of narration. She says:

New Haven cultivates instead an open gloom that seems happy to acknowledge disrepair and the superfluity of appearance. It does not pretend to be a place where people eat or spend their leisure in wide space, uncloistered; it believes rather in the virtue of a dark interior. (182)

Thus, with a willingness to retreat to her past, she draws an end to her life narrative and also happens to reflect on the lived experience. Although her narration somewhat falls in between the realisation-realisation of childhood, mother, Dadi, father, but still she engages in the new land. And this new place in America gives her that space where she cultivates her memory.

The study underlines that both the texts *Fault Lines* and *Meatless Days* are autobiographies written by South-Asian women authors but the approach towards society and self contains certain differences as well as similarities. Definitely, these two texts have themselves in common the elements of woman's familial self and transcultural communication. Both the texts from their different paradigms, present the 'self', culture and practices of home and host land in an interconnected manner. Where Alexander addresses the complexities of land, culture and language as a woman's quest for identity, Suleri's text depicts woman as a marginal part in the patriarchal social structure where migration is the major reason for creating the distance.

Again, Alexander's projection of self and migration is very much individualistic, whereas Suleri's self-representation is connected to the members of her family. She (Suleri), as if, divides herself among them and then writes her experience through them. *Meatless Days* bears a historical connotation where, due to certain historical events, Sara has to migrate in another place. She remembers her history as it is somewhat related to her life. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander records her search for roots in her past, and memory works as an intermediate element between the past and the present. On the contrary,

memory in Suleri is the combination of private and social elements. Through this, she attempts to create her own familial space.

The two texts articulate the life of woman but the use of diction and language is pretty metaphorical in *Meatless Days* than *Fault Lines*. The narration of *Meatless Days* uses symbols and images to portray the words and experiences of migration. Compared to that, Alexander's uses are simple and natural description of situations faced by her. Again, when the issue of writing comes, it is worth mentioning that the two texts belong to two different social backgrounds. They certainly represent different perspectives of society towards woman. Representations of autobiographical subject in these two texts suggest a loud and prominent voice of woman. Through writing, these two authors assert their identity in the transcultural space.

The illustration of feminine self in these texts brings out the social construction of 'woman' as a secondary being - as a binary of 'male'. Moreover, when the question of transcultural affiliation comes into consideration with the self-representation of women, both the writings present the conflict and subordination confronted by woman. Suleri offers her transcultural experience through the narration of her mother - her negotiation of space and culture as well as dealing with the patriarchal force being an outsider. In addition, Alexander's transcultural engagements are diverse in nature where she enjoys the cultural mix, and at the same time tries to locate her past and childhood practices.

The two texts have primarily evolved as a cultural representation where their value lies on the complex dynamics of culture and the practice of that accounted by these two woman narrators. As life writing suggests a specific time frame, a specific social as well as historical context and space, these two authors challenge the dominant discourse of social and private space and try to break the ideological construction on/of female and feminine self. The question of woman come in terms of representation in the society, where the transcultural space provides her a private space, which Showalter termed as 'wild zone' (200), for articulation of her own in her own words. This becomes a space for women's articulation of self in terms of literary representation through novels, short stories, dramas, articles, poems and autobiographies. In these life narratives, the reference of dominant culture as a part of the larger culture exposes the minority experience and the negotiation of social formation of self in consideration with the race, gender and ethnicity. Woman in a new space also has a ground to express her ideas as well as exchange the cultural element and develop herself beyond the discourses of centre and margin. Another aspect of these two texts is their author's projection of an objective

outlook to their homeland culture. Thus, in spite of idealising their home (homeland), they narrate their lives with a critical outlook. In this regard, autobiography written by a female author in a new land, does not remain a private act of writing life story, rather it becomes a representative of culture with the effort of self-objectification.

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