



MEENA ALEXANDER'S SKILL IN SUGGESTING A PATH OF RECOVERY AND HEALING THROUGH FEMALE SOLIDARITY AND FRIENDSHIP.

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Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to study Meena Alexander's skills in suggesting a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. Meena Alexander holds her space in the women's writers world of initial rejection, dejection, familial bonds and domesticity. In **Draupadi** she creates a world of tribal rebels who fights against the political system of enforced capitalism. In **Building Vines** she examines the experiences of women coming from different echelons of society. She is a writer who emerged from a postcolonial country and her work deals with personal as well as national concern. Thus this paper deals with her skills in suggesting a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship.*

Key Words: *Recovery, Female Solidarity, Friendship, Rebel, National Concern.*

What is commonly held is that women writers in India are found to be moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. They are seen busting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances and they are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. Indian writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anitha Desai, Kamala Das, Shoba De and Meena Alexander, just to name a few, hold their own space in the women's writer's world of initial rejection, dejection, familial bonds and domesticity. These writers and many others along with them are said to have climbed the ladder of success in the slow but painful way.

These women writers have given literary work in India an unmistakable edge. They are able to sensitively portray a world that has in it women rich in substance. Their women are real flesh and blood protagonists who make the readers look at them with awe with their relationships to their surroundings, their society, their men, their children, their families, their mental make-ups and themselves. Women's writing in the 20th Century moved towards a medium of modernism in which womanist and feminist statements were combined with political messages women writers like Mahashweta Devi combined women's causes with political movements. In **Draupadi**, she creates a world of tribal rebels whose fight against a political system of enforced capitalism has driven them to become Naxalites (Supporters of a Chinese style communism). Others like Shashi Deshpande build platform universal female experiences. In **Building Vines**, she examines the experiences of women coming from different echelons of society. Meena Alexander is one such writer who emerged from a post-colonial country and her work deals with personal as well as national concerns.

Meena Alexander was born into a socially prominent, Syrian Christian family on February 17, 1951 in the Hindu pilgrimage city of Allahabad in North India. She was baptized Mary Elizabeth Alexander after her two grandmothers Mariamma and Eli. Christened Mary Elizabeth, she has been called "Meena" since birth and in her fifteenth year she officially changed her name to Meena. After her school education at the age of eighteen she went to attend Nottingham University in England where she completed her doctoral dissertation. Where she completed her doctoral dissertation. She returned to



India at the age of twenty-two and lived in Delhi and Hyderabad in her twenties, teaching at the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Central Institute of Hyderabad and the University of Hyderabad. Then she served as professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Meena Alexander's literary career began early at the tender age of ten when she began writing poetry. While her poetry might be her best known work, her works span variety of literary genres. Her first book, a single lengthy poem, entitled *The Birds's Bright Wing* was published in 1976 in Calcutta. Since then, the alexander has published eight volumes of poetry including *River and Bridge*; two novels *NampellyRoad*(1991) and *Manhattan Music*(1997); two collections of both prose and poetry , *The shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience and Poetics of Dislocation*; a study on Romeenticism: *Women in Romanticism: Many Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelly* and her autobiography, *Fault Lines*. *Fault Lines* is Alexander's Autobiography. Not only an unraveling of her past, this book also highlights themes that occur in alexander's poetry and fiction. As a result of her family's relocations as a youth Alexander struggles in *Fault Lines* to forge a sense of identity, despite a past full of moves and changes. Thus this work revolves around the theme of establishing one's self, aw identity independent of one's surroundings. In her autobiography, she writes

“I am women cracked by multiple migrations uprooted so many times, she can connect nothing with nothing” (3).

In Fact, the title itself suggests a questioning of lines, boundaries, and definitions of oneself. As Alexander writes, I am a poet writing in America. But American Poet? ...An Asian-American Poet then? ...Poet tout court...Women poet, a women poet of color, a south Indian woman who makes up lines in English ...A third world woman poet ...?(193). Alexander searches for her own identity and self creation amidst a world that strives to define, identify and label people. These definitions of race and nationality prove difficult to defy her second novel *Manhattan Music* analyses all the above issues.

Early in her youth, Alexander's mother told her she must never take a job that “her work is to raise her children (14) Alexander choices obviously took her in a direction different from that which her mother had taught her, choosing both a career and a family. Thus the process of self-creation for Alexander has numerous facets: creating an identity despite a patchwork past; fighting against definitions demanded by greater society and also fighting against traditions and definitions enforced within the community. Feminist issues comprise the majority of her work; including her scholarly studies and female narrators and characters dominate both her poetry and fiction. *I Root my Name*, for instance, intimates, the painful experiences of women, while ‘A Mirror's Grace’ a poem appearing in without place, recounts Cleopatra's struggle to resist slipping into the margins of patriarchal linguistics. *Hose of a Thousand Doors* centers on memories and dreams of Alexander's grandmother, whom the poet described as “a power permitting me to speak in an alien language”. *The Storm* does contemplate the feminist ideal of recreating and fragmentary matrilineal memories. Like her poetry, alexander's fiction carries autobiographical overtone. Centered on literature's relation to life and women's role as header of communal ills, *Nampally Road* relates the story of a women writer who returns to her native India following her college education abroad. Set in Contemporary New York, *Manhattan Music* traces a female immigrant's gradual recovery of her self-identity through a series of inters racial, multicultural relationships and intellectual associations.



Alexander's writing received critical acclaim. *Fault Lines*, now widely taught at University level, was chosen as one of publishers weekly's best books of 1993, while *Illiterate Heart* won a 2002 PEN open Book Award. As an Indian writer, Alexander's poetry and fiction reflect her multi cultural life experiences among diverse ethnic and religious communities on four continents Generally concerned with the roles of place, memory and language in identity formation, Alexander's works examine the disparate elements of her heritage and her cultural displacement, concentrating particularly on her status as an educated women of the South Asian diaspora living and writing in the west critical discussion of her writings often centers on her contributions to Anglophone Post Colonial literature, but Scholars also have responded to her feminist perspective on literary and cultural issues. Alexander has remarked thus

“When I do not think I consciously write as women, I have little doubt that some of my deepest emotions and insight spring from having been born into a female body, learning to grow up as a women in both a traditional Indian Culture south India, Syrian Christian, Malayalam, Speaking-and as a part of complex, shifting South Asian Diaspora”(Fault Lines22)

Meena Alexander's writings reflect her own lived diasporic experiences: on the one hand, those of uprooting, exile trauma, separation and loneliness, but on the other those of hope and a privileged multiple vision that can alone transcend rigid national and cultural barriers Rebecca Sultana highlights the disruptive nature of Alexander's writings by commenting on the subversive diasporic vision that they systematically offer:

“Alexander's writing disturbs and reconfigures the representations of the nation by situating her novel and personal narratives upon the politics of displacement. This displacement is figured in terms of a diasporic feminist vision that allows for a questioning of patriarchal narratives of nation and identity. In doing so, her texts also rewrite normative identity categories such as those of nation race gender and post coloniality” (P62)

Meena Alexander's sense of displacement has always been partially countered by the Gandhian ideology that she inherited and contributed to the awakening of her cultural identity. As she put it In an interview, “My Grandfather was a great idealist who really believed that reform and equality are for all people” (Grewal 23) Her well-known novel *Nampally Road* projects the India after twenty five years of independence. As a socio-political and social problems with a focus on changes in these realms in Indian society. In *Nampally Road*, Alexander has shown the deterioration in the personal and political areas of life. In this novel, Meena Alexander is the spokes person who depicts the political life of the country as it happened in the immediate post-independence era.

Nampally Road is based on some selected incidents, which happen in Hyderabad, and in particular on a road called Nampally Road. The Narrator is Mira, a College teacher; she is accompanied by a male colleague, arrear they both teach English in Sona Nivas, a local college. He is so completely native that he gives up all opportunities of going abroad, which is odd considering that most people in India have always been crazy about going abroad during and after the colonial period:

“--he turned down the Rhodes scholarship that others might have killed for, accepted a modest grant from Jawaharlal Nehru University and source on the memory of his dead mother never to leave the boundaries of free India---“(Nampally Road 3)



He is highly unorthodox and rejects superstitions including what he refers to as “horoscope rubbish”, Ramu is an active participant in all protests once he helped to produce the underground newspaper that students set by hand. For this, he was detained and held in custody several times he always wanted to make a difference to do something for India, whatever that something might be.

The main event in the novel is the birthday celebration of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. The Novelist herself comments:

“Limca Gowda was an ambitious man and wished to turn himself into an absolute ruler---
-The Notion of unquestioned power vested in a single man pleased him enormously. Sometimes as might, he dreamed that he was the old nizam of Hyderabad, returned in new flesh to claim his kingdom—His party which had been voted in four years, now ruled with an iron hand-Dissent was strongly discouraged”

Gowda assumes an almost Hitler-like persona and suppresses the marginalized. Nampally road, the area which is fairly quiet otherwise, turns into a noisy throughfare because of the birthday celebrations of the chief minister. The tax money of the common people is squandered and this has come to stay as an accepted norm under post-colonial condition:

“Fully authorized by his own ruling party, Limca Gowda had decided to turn his dreams to good use. His office was now run from the old fort of Golconda, the seat of the rulers of ancient Hyderabad, It was rumored that for his birthday celebrations fast approaching now, he would take hold of history with an iron hand, mix and match as he desired dress up as the last QutubShahi and Mimic the mad gestures of the dead Nizam” (NR 38)

Rape is the most heinous crime committed by man against woman. In *Nampally Road* a woman is raped in police custody and two other women are raped and buried half alive in the shifting sands of the Arabian Sea. Despite strong recommendations by the Law Commission of India, Several judgements in High Courts and Supreme Court as well as laws against, the police do not take any action, as they seem to be more worried about the birthday bash of the chief minister than about the tragic fate of a poor woman. The Novelist describes the happening thesis:

“A young woman had come in from the mountains with her husband it was late at night— they fell prey to a horde of drunken policemen. Rameeza was gang raped. Her husband had his brains beaten out. His body was recovered from a well behind the police station. Swollen the eyes puffed out, it was identified—“(NR 58)

A few days after Rameeza Begum’s incident, a small crowd gathers and agitates in order to rescue her:

“---scores of men and women thrust hard against the main doors of the police station --- smoke was everywhere ...the police station started burning. It burned very well.... A quick sudden revenge---“(60)

But very soon, many were quickly arrested and carried off in the black vans by the reserve police. Rameeza is declared a “source of turbulence” Student leaders, workers and some intellectuals are also arrested they were to be held a “protective detention”, it was said, until the chief minister’s birthday was over...The Novel has another important character, Dr. Durgabai who is referred as Little Mother. Another seems to imply that India needs the heading touch of doctors like Durgabai. The little Mother perhaps is an allegory of Mother India. The allegory is made evident when Durgabai suffers illness when the city goes through commotions and atrocities carried out in the name of politics. Durgabai also



evinces great interest in all the happenings of the novel and suffers mental trauma as she suffers variously with the sufferings of the oppressed.

Durgaboi feels horror troubled by rich men's meaningless show and the elaborate life style of modern doctors which can be supported only with the help of black money. Her attention is wholly dedicated to a long-awaited transformation of India. "A New India is being Born", she claims significantly. She has a soft corner for women in trouble. For instance, in the case of D and c, she explains to Mira that after physical healing, one should move on to emotional healing:"Then you have to build up the woman's spirit so "the same doesn't last" she explained to me. The rape is terrible the fate of some of our young girls...." (NR 16).

The Nampally Road is a novel of protest and anger. Initially disagreement is registered through mild protests. The novel tries to prove that the anger of the meek and the humble could rise to the level of mass rebellion, which will ultimately decimate the perpetrators of injustice. In every colonial nation, human relationships have arisen from the severest exploitation, founded on inequality and contempt and guaranteed by police authoritarianism. All administrative and political machinery is geared to a regime of oppression for the benefit of a few. For the Colonizer, the most important area of domination is the mental domain of the colonized. The native woman is doubly marginalized by virtue of her relative economic oppression and gender subordination. In all spheres of Indian society, women are dominated, dehumanized and dewomenized, discriminated against exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called supremacy. Indian women still live under the shadow of patriarchal tradition that manifests itself in violence against women. To quote an example from the novel, Alexander, beautifully narrates a small woman who is in no way linked to the birthday celebrations of Gowda, is threatened by an Ever Ready man:

"The Poor Old woman is concentrating sincerely in mending the broken chapel of mira. She is not only old and poor but suffers from lenkoderma. The cobbler woman carefully works on the chappal without minding the slogans and the busy trucks carrying the cheering villagers, cheering for a promise of three free meals and a handful of rupees. But nothing seems to bother the women who choose a pavement to work for her livelihood. All on a sudden, ever ready man covers and staves at her kicked some of her leather scraps into the guitar and then walked away, lather in hand"(NR 102).

But the Old woman is calm and composed and continues to do her work. Her nonviolence attitude is amazing to Mira, the college teacher, whose passion rises at the flicker of anger. Mira understands that the marginalized have to sustain their anger so that a day will come for them to reap justice, liberty and equality with the help of the sickles they carry. Alexander questions the value of non-violence of Gandhi, because it almost fails to bring a change in the lives of the poor and the subdivided as seen in the life of the cobbler woman. Unless women take up the "Knife of justice" (NR 90) there is little chance for freedom and justice. The Subaltern must speak, speak on louder and louder one by one and then must go in for action, just like the woman from a village, a Maitreyi and Rosamma. Thus, Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship.



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