

Search for self-identity in Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*

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Abstract:

Meena Alexander, an internationally acclaimed poet, scholar, and writer also with kaleidoscopic qualities. She was Born in Allahabad and raised in India and Sudan. She belongs to a Syrian Christian Family, she accompanied her parents when she was five to Khartoum, Sudan, later she attended the university of Khartoum where she studied English and French Literature. Then she moved to England for her doctoral studies in Nottingham. She returned to Hyderabad and started to teach English at Sona Nivas college. Meena Alexander traces her life from childhood in India through youth in England. As a result, Alexander struggles to find her identity, despite a past full of moves and changes. This paper discusses the novel *Nampally Road* and how Alexander portrays the pain of losing self-identity, dislocation, immigration.

Keywords: feminism, immigration, searching for self, violence.

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From the late nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century women were making claims for their power and importance as writers and also for the lives of women as significant subject matter. Prominent women writers are Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai and Meena Alexander. Their novels focus on psychological sufferings of women. The themes are often about the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes.

Meena Alexander is an Indian writer whose poetry and fiction reflects her multi-cultural life experience 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 woman of the South Asian diaspora living and writing in the west. Alexander's search for psychic wholeness through language is a prevalent theme of her poetry also articulates the concerns facing many postcolonial writers silenced by the

dominant literary traditions of the imperial past. Alexander is known for lyrical writing that deals with migration, its impact the subjectivity of the writer and sometimes violent events that compel people to cross borders. Though confronting such stark and difficult issues, her writing is sensual, play got and maintains a generous spirit.

The novel *Nampally Road* vividly portrays contemporary India and one woman's struggle to piece together her past. At the heart of this novel, is the gang rape of Rameeza Be by the police. The towns people rise up and burn the police station. This novel reissued in 2013 by Orient Blackswan has a powerful resonance with the recent tragic events in Delhi. When it was first published in 1991 the novel was a Voice Literary Supplement Editor's Choice. Alexander focuses on issues of cultural richness, psychological complexity, feminism and social politics. *Nampally Road* is a narrative of minority struggle that focuses on the juxtaposition of past relationship and cultural and historical inheritance.

Mira was born in India a few years after the independence and she didn't agree to her mother's decision for an arranged marriage for her. She went to England as an undergraduate student and spent several years there. Life in England was a torture to Mira because she couldn't adjust with the fast lifestyle of the European people. She attended some dancing parties of the students but they disgusted her because of the loud music and the harsh lights. She even tried to go out every evening with a different boyfriend according to the western custom. Europeans considered it a permanent commitment or attachment to have the same boyfriend for a longer period.

Mira wanted to write a few poems so as to find out a separate identity for herself. She wanted to establish what she was. She thought that by writing a few poems or even a few prose pieces, she could start to give a meaning to her life. The novelist makes it very clear that Mira had a complex inter-cultural personality because she was an Indian girl who got a colonial education. When Mira got a teaching job in Hyderabad, she gladly accepted it because she thought that going to India would give her a chance to establish a clearer identity for herself. Once she reached in Hyderabad, she felt that she was no more a girl in confusion but a woman of firm standing. In any case her mind had grown stronger. She could live her life fully only in her own country. Mira decided to make William Wordsworth her role model in life. Wordsworth was one of the English poets whom Mira read very closely as a part of her M.A. final year studies. He had written several poems on nature especially about beautiful places where he wanted to return again and again. He was a great poet and he haunted the memory of Mira. She loved Wordsworth because he understood suffering and desire that could not let itself free. Mira wanted to become a poet by achieving the clarity of Wordsworth.

When Mira started living in Hyderabad, she had minor problems about readjusting with the Indian society. Once Mira started eating with her left hand by mistake and this shocked many Andhrites who saw it. She started teaching English literature at the Sona Nivas College, Hyderabad. The professor allotted her the lectures on Wordsworth and Mira became a favourite among the students of Sona Nivas. During her free time, Mira continued her attempts to write poems. She had a good collection of little notebooks hidden under her bed. Ramu made fun of the creative attempts of Mira and commented that no one had the right to impose ideas on the

readers. Mira explained that writing poems was a mission in her life. She was 25 years old and she hardly knew what she was writing. She was very much confused inside her mind in spite of all her western education. She wanted to become a poet so as to establish a new identity for herself. Otherwise her mother will dress her up in silks and gold and marry her off to some rich engineer or estate owner. Mira strongly felt that she may not be able to survive such a marriage. According to Mira, marriage was a personal matter and she will commit into a marriage only when she is fully prepared for the arrangement.

Mira's search for identity makes a sharp turn when she sees Rameeza Be for the first time inside the Gowliguda police station. Rameeza's sari was stiff with blood. She lay curled up on the mud floor of the prison room just behind the wooden desk. Her face was held up by the mud. Mosquitoes were buzzing over her and still both her eyes were open. She was breathing in a jagged, irregular manner. Mira gripped the cell bars and looked at her for a long time. She bent forward and put her hand inside through the prison bars and touched the damp forehead of Rameeza. The hair from her head was plastered in a light mat on her cheeks and it was held together with blood.

Very soon someone carried away Rameeza to the house of Maitreyamma where she was given good rest and medical attention. It was a long and painstaking process but Rameeza finally emerged healthy because of the strong herbal medicines of Maitreyamma. Ramu and Mira visited Rameeza in that house and her pathetic condition extremely influenced Mira. 'I wished', Mira wondered, 'I could give up my own useless life in some way that could help her'. Thus,

Mira finally found her identity. She understood that she was nobody else other than an ordinary Indian. The suffering of Rameeza Be was the suffering of an entire nation and Mira's mission in life was to seek a solution to give relief to millions of Rameezas in India. Mira became half an Indian by returning to India and deciding to settle down permanently here. She became a full Indian when she understood that her mission in life was to serve India, her motherland.

Nampally road is depicting the painful voices of woman folk stories, characters and plot may differ, but the clutches of violence are so strong that justice seems to be a far off decision. The novel not only focuses on the consciousness of the rape victim but tries putting forward the idea as demonstrated by Gayatri Spivak regarding subalterns. It demonstrates the analysis of the subaltern and speech in the representation of Rameeza's experience. The text brings forward the difficulty, in the fact impossibility of articulating traumatic experience for the rape victim and the difficulty of a writer in representing this in any factual or fictional narrative.

In the novel, the incident of Rameeza Be rape under the police custody reported in the papers and led to the burning of a police station in Hyderabad. Yet this event itself is transformed into a poetic symbol. There are dreams and portents linking Rameeza Be with Durgabai and the protagonist, Mira, who is a foreign-returned woman trying to find herself. The other main character is Ramu her lover, an activist who is in the thick of the civil liberty struggle, but who remains strangely opposed to Mira's writing, and a Roman Catholic servant who wants to emigrate to Canada. Such is the exotic cast of the novel.

Alexander creates a feminist space where characters are given a voice. This novel vividly portrays contemporary India and one woman's struggle to peace. The companionship between women are nurturing and sustaining. The violence is portrayed through the story of Rameeza Be who is a woman of little stature. The physical violence done to this innocent woman leads to psychological violence and fear in the mind of the inhabitants. The protagonist exemplifying Meena Alexander's own alter-ego, finds it very difficult to maintain a balance between her life of writing and grim realities that surround her. The catastrophic events of Rameeza's life force Mira to ponder over the glorified concept of nationalism and her own identity as a writer. Mira begins to feel that her drafts are void of clarity and completion even when there is a stack of notebooks under her bed.

Yet even with an optimistic Mira, along with Durgabai she makes arrangements for the rehabilitation of Rameeza Be. To see the transformation of a peace-loving and economically secure Mira into a radical, joining the crowd to protest against injustices reflect the author's innermost doubts and confused emotions regarding identity and meaning and her own attempts to deal with dislocation of space, time, memory and real world.

Thus Alexander has brought to attention the plight of women in post-colonial nations. In the so-called decolonized nations, women's lives are still dominated by their patriarchs at home and in society at large. That was vividly expressed in her novels.

Work Cited

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