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Women and Violence: Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* in Context

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Abstract

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which has led to domination over and discrimination against women by men. Violence affects the lives of millions of women worldwide, in all socio-economic and educational classes. It cuts across cultural and religious barriers, impeding the right of women to participate fully in society. Violence against women takes a dismaying variety of forms, from domestic abuse and rape to child marriages and female circumcision. All are violations of the most fundamental human rights. In India, as well as in foreign countries, violence against women is a common phenomenon. Violence against women is present in every region, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age. Even though most societies proscribe violence against women, the reality is that violations against women's human rights are often sanctioned under the garb of cultural practices and norms, or through misinterpretation of religious tenets. My paper strives to show how the thought of Mira Kannadical in *Nampally Road* actually makes her realise her position in society. The novel presents violence on physical as well as mental level. Mira's returning to India was an attempt to stitch everything together, including her birth, national independence, her colonial education, her rebellion against the arranged marriage and her years of research in England. But the India which Mira actually visits teems with confusion and unrest. As the conflict between the townspeople and police reaches a boiling point, she realises that the unrest in the souls of every Indian is too visible, and too turbulent. She turns from poetry to an exploration of herself. It shows how a woman from a middle class background observes so many challenges. A reading of *Nampally Road* presents the picture of contemporary India and one woman's struggle to piece together her past amidst all the violence and turmoil.

Keywords: Women, Violence, Cultural Practices, Contemporary India

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Violence as defined by the World Health Organisation is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. This definition associates intentionality with the committing of the act itself, irrespective of the outcome it produces. Globally, violence takes the lives of more than 1.5 million people annually, just over 50% due to suicide, some 35% due to homicide and just over 12% as a direct result of war or some other form of conflict. Violence often has lifelong consequences for victims' physical and mental health and social functioning and can slow down economic and social development. In the definition of violence above the inclusion of the word 'power' broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence to include those acts that result from a power relationships including threats and intimidation.

Many forms of violence against women, children and elderly can result in physical, psychological and social problems that do not necessarily lead to injury, disability or death. These consequences can be immediate, as well as latent and can last for years after the initial abuse. In countries with high levels of violence, economic growth can be slowed down, personal and collective security eroded and social development impeded. Violence cannot be attributed to a single factor. Its causes are complex and occur at different levels. To represent this complexity the social ecological model is often used. The following four level version of the ecological model is often used in the study of violence. The first level identifies biological and personal factors that influence how individual behave and increase their likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. The second level focuses on close relationships such as those with family and friends. The third level explores the community context. Finally the fourth level looks at the broad societal factors that help to create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited: social acceptability of violence, income inequality etc.

Violence against women is a technical term which is used to collectively refer to violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women. It is very similar to hate crime. This type of violence targets a specific group with the victim's gender as a primary motive. The United Nations General Assembly defines "violence against women" as "any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Many activists believe that working towards the elimination of domestic violence means working to eliminate a societal hierarchy enforced through sexism. Violence against women- particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women are major public health problems and violations of women's human rights.

Every case of violence is exceptional and not always of one type. My paper basically will focus on two types of violence done on women. The first kind of violence is physical violence which is illegal, intentional, against women's body, aiming to kill, causing health damage, powerless condition, physical pain and other kinds of physical sufferings. Another one is psychological violence which is more dangerous, always deliberate, intentionally affecting human mind, causing fear of particular negative consequences because of further steps or inaction of violator.

Meena Alexander writing from a postcolonial feminist standpoint tries to put forward the physical as well as the psychological violence through her novel entitled *Nampally Road*. The story of the novel is set in Hyderabad of the late seventies when Meena herself was teaching at

the Golden Threshold on Nampally road. Forming the backdrop is one dark page in Hyderabad's history, the gang rape of a young woman Rameeza Be by policemen in the Nallikunta police station and the murder of her husband in 1976 which brought three quarters of the city under curfew. The violence done in the society not only affects the victim physically but people especially women concerned are even psychologically affected. The story is a simple one but the affect of violence it leaves on the readers is worth marking out.

The story of Nampally Road is the story of Mira Kannadical and how she witnesses so many turmoils and upheavals all around her. She is a graduate from England and has returned to her native place Hyderabad. She is a teacher and is teaching Wordsworth, but her attention is seen to be distracted by the turmoil in streets around her. The city is going through tough times where a woman is raped and her husband is killed brutally. To top it all, the culprits of this action are the policemen of the city who are appointed by the government to maintain law and order. To cover up their crimes they have put the woman Rameeza Be in police custody, all kinds of violence are done to her. And to paper it over the misery and abuses of power, the chief minister of state, Limca Gowda is organising a massive festival to celebrate his despotic regime as a shining light of progress. Mira is finally shown to have a realisation that it is the big political lies which are the dark side of Romantic myth-making. The violence done to Rameeza Be makes Mira long for something beyond political action that she can do to fathom their suffering and ease their pain. Mira's acquaintance Ramu promises that people will rise up to avenge Rameeza Be, the rape victim but Mira senses that the woman is suffering, and struggling with a pain too deep to be touched by his words, too deep to be expressed in her own words. The violence has left such an indelible affect and impact on Rameeza that when she is provided with pen and paper to express herself, she shakily proceeds to draw a pyramid of stones- which Mira believes is the very same image that has been haunting her own nightmares of late: stones of human flesh forming a pyramid, with water rising all around. The novel tackles a number of serious and complex themes without reaching any neat conclusions.

The portrayal of women characters and the violence faced by them on psychological planes show how Meena Alexander has tried doing justice to the themes she has undertaken in the novel. For all the power of Alexander's portrayal of the harsh world her heroine inhabits, there is a tentative, refreshingly modest quality about this book that moves one to respect its honesty even when its pacing at times falters and focus is blurred. Set in the 1970s when Indira Gandhi's crackdown on dissent seemed to many the most alarming threat on the subcontinent's political horizon. The novel, no doubt, transcends the specifics of its time and place by probing and investigating beneath the levels of politics, economics and ideology to touch something far more basic. The situation portrayed in Alexander's *Nampally Road* is torn by religious factionalism as bloody as anything since the murderous days following its independence, serves as a grim reminder of the forces that threaten not only a writers imagination but life itself.

The violence is portrayed through the story of Rameeza who was a woman of little stature. While walking back from the movie with her husband she was attacked by the drunken policemen. She was brutally raped by all of them and her husband's brain was beaten out. His dead body was later recovered from a well behind the police station. In one day, the entire life of a simple woman was converted to hell. The condition of Rameeza becomes so deplorable and pathetic that she reaches a point where her recovery is not sure. The physical violence done to this innocent woman leads to psychological violence and fear in the minds of the local inhabitants. Their agitation makes them powerful enough to organize small groups. These groups attack the Gowliguda police station, thereby making Rameeza escape the hell. The entire police

station is set on fire, once Rameeza is rescued from there. The entire city of Hyderabad witnesses riot afterwards. The government tries putting control and end to all this violence, but to no avail. Curfew is imposed on the city, so as to control the situation. Once the city gets back to its normal state, the birthday celebrations of the then chief minister Limca Gowda starts. On the day of celebration once again these groups create havoc so as to disrupt the entire celebration and show their anger. All the efforts for birthday celebrations are collapsed. Mira, the protagonist too was attending the celebration when people start running to save their lives after the turmoil takes place at the chief minister's birthday celebrations; she witnesses a surprising thing that a pool of water is burning, there she is reminded of Nagarjuna's saying that if fire is lit in water no one can extinguish it. The people took revenge in the form of violence for the rape of innocent Rameeza and murder of her husband by messing up the chief minister's birthday celebrations.

The observation which can be made through all this is that violence of any kind leads to violence only. An innocent woman becomes the victim of some policemen, she was raped, was tortured physically and mentally. Violence done to her ultimately led to violence in the whole city of Hyderabad. It is a shame that the preservers of law and order, the policemen actually became the law breakers thereby making the whole city suffer and burn for no reason. It was a pleasure seeking activity for them to rape a woman and kill her husband, but this was violence done not only to a single woman, but it was a psychological and mental violence done to all the women folk of the country who came to know about this incident. Violence begets violence and that is what happens in Meena Alexander's novel *Nampally road*. The dimensions may differ but the violence against women is appearing to increase day by day as we are claiming to progress. This progress is nothing but a digression, a country where woman is treated just like a commodity, with no voice of her own, and where all kinds of violence are done to her without any reason, the only being a woman, where the law and order itself is in the garb of culprit, and where the justice is dead, shows that dooms day is not so far.

Nampally Road is just another novel 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. When will an awakening take place so that people may realise what exactly a woman is? It is enough of violence on woman be it Rameeza Be or Mira or someone else, the time is to stop all this, then only any progress on any ground can be imagined.

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