

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN MEENA ALEXANDER’S “NAMPALLY ROAD”

Krishnaveer Abhishek Challa

Soft Skills Trainer cum Faculty,

Dept of Foreign Languages, Andhra University

PhD Research Scholar, Dept of Linguistics, Andhra University

Secretary, Linguistics Research Society

Visakhapatnam, India

ABSTRACT

Meena Alexander is a creative writer and an internationally highly praised poetess and scholar. Her writing is sensual and maintains a generous spirit. The novel Nampally Road vividly portrays contemporary India. At the heart of this novel, is the gang rape of RameezaBe by the police. The town's people rise up and burn the police station. The plot develops around the arrest and torture of an innocent bystander, RameezaBe, whose plight inspires the local activists, one of whom is Mira's boyfriend and fellow teacher, Ramu. Meanwhile, Mira's mentor, Durgabai, resists oppression by ministering at a local shelter to victimized women. Mira wonders how to reconcile the world she lives in with her job teaching English poetry and eventually leaves the school to help Rameeza. The paper reflects the internal puzzlement of a displaced and dislocated woman in Meena Alexander's novel Nampally Road. This paper focuses on issues of psychological complexity, feminism, social politics and the plight of women in the society and how a woman could successfully overcome all the difficulties which she had braved and become a role model to all women

Key words: Feminism, Atrocities, Pathetic, Turbulence, Meena Alexander, women and English literature.

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A SMALL INTRODUCTION ABOUT MEENA ALEXANDER:

Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India. She turned five on the Indian Ocean, on the journey with her mother from India to Sudan. She was raised both in Kerala, South India and in Khartoum, Sudan. At eighteen she went to England for her studies. She has a B.A. Honors in French and English from Khartoum University and a Ph.D. from Nottingham University.

She is Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at the City University of New York and teaches in the PhD Program in English at CUNY Graduate Center and in the English Department at Hunter College. Her poems have been set to music, including "Impossible Grace," which was the lyric base of the First Al Quds Music Award and "Aequa Alta," which was set to music by the Swedish composer Jan Sandstrom for the Serikon Music Group's climate change project.

She has published two novels **Nampally Road** (1991/ 2012 – republished by Orient Blackswan) and **Manhattan Music**. Her academic studies include **The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism** and **Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley**.

Her book of poetry **Illiterate Heart** won the PEN Open Book Award and she received a Glenna Luschei Award for poems published in *Prairie Schooner*. She has received awards from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Arts Council of England, and National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, and National Council for Research on Women, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Ledig-Rowohl Foundation in Switzerland. She was the recipient of the 2009 Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature from the South Asian Literary Association (an organization allied to the Modern Languages Association) for contributions to American literature. (Leenerts, 2009)

THE OUTLINE OF MEENA ALEXANDER’S NAMPALLY ROAD:

Mira Kannadical returns to India after graduate school in England to teach, but when she moves into a house on Nampally road in Hyderabad, she must come to terms with the conflicts and contradictions of life in modern India. Rameeza Be was a little woman who lived in a mountain village near Hyderabad. She came to the city with her husband. They went to see the celebrated 'Isak Katha' at Sagar Talkies. When the film finished, it was late at night. They started walking back to the house of some relative in the town. Suddenly a group

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of drunken policemen attacked them. Rameeza was raped by all the policemen. Her husband was violently attacked and his brain was beaten out. Later his dead body was recovered from a well behind the police station which was identified by his brother who was a lorry driver in Hyderabad. Rameeza became extremely ill because of the gang rape. There was a rumour in Hyderabad that Rameeza Be was hidden inside the police station so as to hush up the whole story of murder and rape. One day Ramu walked into the Gowliguda police station and enquired about Rameeza. The policemen became nervous and angry and shouted Ramu out of the police station.

Very soon the people got agitated and organized in small groups. They marched into the Gowliguda police station and attacked it. It was a gracious building built in the British style with stone steps, wooden pillars and whitewashed walls. They found Rameeza imprisoned in one of the cells. She was lying on the floor and Mira touched her forehead through the iron bars. The cell was broken in and Rameeza was taken to the house of Maitreyamma. The agitators have brought numerous bottles filled with kerosene. Somebody lit a matchstick and suddenly the old wooden building of the police station began to burn. Within a few minutes hundreds of reserve police and gangs of Ever Ready men arrived on the scene. But they could do nothing as the building was completely destroyed. The rioters have already dispersed. A small number of rioters remained throwing stones and bricks at the policemen and they were immediately arrested and taken away.

Very soon the riot spread all over the city. The government tried to control the issue with all their might. The students were an active part of the revolutionary movement and so the classes couldn't be conducted at the Sona Nivas College. The law and order situation was so bad that the normal evening shows of the Sagar Talkies was cancelled. Curfew was imposed for several days and it was removed only after the situation came under control. Once the city returned to normalcy, the birthday celebrations of the chief minister started. Limca Gowda arrived for the celebrations with a procession of horsemen and elephants. Trumpets and horns were played when he entered the venue of the pageant. Limca Gowda's birth, childhood and youth were depicted on the stage in a highly dramatic style by inducing myth after myth into the episodes. The last stage was meant to be the appearance of film stars for singing songs in praise of the chief minister. A huge cardboard model of the ancient inner city of Hyderabad was displayed on the stage. Limca's birthplace was specially highlighted in red light. Suddenly a cracking sound was heard from the top of the cardboard city. A sheet of flame appeared and soon fire began to lit the entire stage. There was immediate confusion and people began to run for their lives. There was a big sound of something exploding inside the cardboard city and thousands of wires, bulbs and cardboard pieces began to scatter all around the place. The wind rose high and firemen couldn't control the flames. All around the pageant venue, people began to run in wild haste. There were men, women, society matrons, soldiers, sailors, peasants, street children, princes of state and poor sweepers of latrines. Within a few minutes the birthday celebrations organized with the effort of several months collapsed. Mira ran fast and escaped to the lotus pool behind the Public Gardens. To her great surprise, the water in the pool was found burning. A fire had been lit in the water. Mira remembered the ancient saying of Nagarjuna that if a fire is lit in water no one can.

(Meena January 1991)

PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Mira Kannadical, the protagonist is an English professor who returns to India after studying in England for four years and getting a Ph.D on Wordsworth from Nottingham

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University. She feels distraught and out of place in England. 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 found that she was no more a girl in confusion but a woman of firm standing. 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. During her free time, Mira continued her attempts to write poems. 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 for herself a new identity. 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 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.

(Alexander, 2003)

POLITICAL & SOCIAL INSENSITIVITY & ADMINISTRATIVE APATHY

The main event in the novel is the birthday celebration of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. In the novelist's words: Limca Gowda was an ambitious man and wished to turn himself into an absolute ruler. His party which had been voted in four years ago, now rules with an iron hand. Dissent was strongly discouraged. Gowda assumes an almost Hitler-like persona and suppresses the marginalized. Nampally Road, which is fairly quiet, turns into a noisy thoroughfare because of the birthday celebrations of the Chief Minister. The tax money of the common people is spent like water. Meantime, a woman called Rameeza is raped in police custody. Rameeza is a young woman, accompanied by her husband to Sagar Talkies to see the celebrated Isak Katha. On their way back home, they are encircled by a horde of drunken policemen. She is gang-raped and her husband has his brains beaten out. But no one can raise their voice for any matter, till Limca Gowda's sixtieth birthday celebrations are over.

The raped woman has no voice. Her suffering does have a language but who hears? When Rameeza, the victim is interviewed by Mira, that entire she can do is make little whispers and short cries. Ramu and Mira wanted to understand her pain. They tell her that those who raped her will be brought to justice and that people would rise up against violence.

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EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN

Rape is the most heinous crime committed by man against woman. Among others, some police personnel and politicians have also been implicated now and then in rape cases. Sometimes, police officials and staff of civil services tend to claim most rape cases are not rape cases, but cases of consensual sex. For example, a senior official of the Mumbai Police, Mr. Y. P. Singh, once remarked that "Except for a few violent rape cases where brutal force is used, most other cases involve some degree of consensus sex" (The Hindu, October 17, 2004). This argument does not seem to convince many people, perhaps because of stories of various types of police atrocity. People agitate against "police atrocities" almost daily and we read about such demonstrations in our newspapers on a regular basis. A recent incident, On 16 December 2012 where a female physiotherapy intern was beaten and gang raped in Delhi raises furious questions on women's safety in the contemporary India. She died from her injuries thirteen days later while undergoing emergency treatment in Singapore for brain and gastrointestinal damage. Rape, as a form of personal violence, is not merely a physical assault and symbolic of the mistreatment of womankind, but a violation of the most sensitive part of a female psyche. In the novel, 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 judgments in High Courts and Supreme Court as well as laws against rape, the police do not take any action, as they seem to be more worried about the birthday celebrations bash of the Chief Minister than about the tragic fate of a poor woman. A few days after Rameeza Begum's incident a small crowd gathers and agitates in order to rescue her. But very soon, many are 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 in "preventive detention", it was said, "until the Chief Minister's birthday was over."

Harris (3 January 2013)

THE IMPORTANCE & GREAT QUALITIES OF WOMEN IN THIS NOVEL

We are introduced to Dr. Durgabai who is referred to as the Little Mother. The author seems to imply that India needs the healing touch of doctors like Durgabai. The Little Mother, perhaps, is symbolic of Mother India. The symbolism is made evident when Durgabai suffers from illness as the city goes through commotions and atrocities carried out in the name of politics. Durgabai also evinces great interest in all the happenings and suffers mental trauma as she suffers variously in the sufferings of the oppressed. 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. Equipped with the influence of good educational background, both Ramu and Mira, ordinary citizens in the novel, are in a position to serve the nation. There is a barber shop on the right side of Little Mother's house and a bicycle shop on the left. The apprentices, small boys, sleep on the pavement using rugs. Little Mother feels happy in treating their small ailments. She comments on them thus: "They were all picked off the street. He's the good man the bicycle fellow. He treats them as well as he can. But they eat so poorly. A bit of rice or roti and some dal if they're lucky. I have dreams of keeping a buffalo to provide them with milk, what do you think?" Not only the Mother, but even an illiterate cycle shop owner has something constructive to offer toward the building up of the nation's economy. Alexander underscores the point that it is every individual, rich or poor, who makes up the nation, and who should assume the responsibility to shape India into one of the outstanding nations of the world. Little Mother feels upset and

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almost angry. She can sit and read the Wye valley poems, but she raises the question: "Why study Wordsworth in our new India." Poetic sensibilities, fine arts, religion and culture become "luxuries" that well-fed plutocrats only can afford. The novel 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 a mass rebellion, which will ultimately decimate the perpetrators of injustice. The pomp and show accompanying the sixtieth birthday celebration of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister's lava in which Limca Gowda's "Cardboard" city meets a fiery finale. What better protest in the forms of orange sellers' march wells up with anger and determination against manifest injustice in the heart of millions and explodes, leading to such a violent end.

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 de-womanized, discriminated against, exploited, harassed sexually, used, abused and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male 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, an old cobbler woman, who is in no way linked to the birth day celebrations of Gowda, is threatened by an Ever Ready man. The poor old woman is concentrating sincerely in mending the broken chappal (sandals) of Mira. She is not only old and poor but suffers from leuko derma. 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 woman who chooses a pavement to work for her livelihood. All on a sudden, the Ever Ready man comes and "stares at her, kicked some of her leather scraps into the gutter and then walked away, lathi in hand." But the old woman is calm and composed and continues to do her work. Her non-violent attitude is amazing to Mira, the college teacher, whose passion rises at the flicker of anger. Mira, an educated, a college teacher, seems to derive her strength for action from the subaltern voices. The final chapter of the novel pictures how woman from a village, narrates the everyday atrocities in Hyderabad. She boldly raises her voice against the centre for the marginalized. This shows that the subaltern also can speak and it shall surely be heard. The next speaker in the crowd is Maitreyi, a sweeper in the police station. She is the only eye witness of the rape. She describes how Rameeza is "dragged up the steps" and later "thrown into the cell". The next speaker is also a woman. She is introduced as Rosamma from the hill country. She says, "Overcome oppression, down with chains." She puts on Mira's shoulder and says, "You must not be afraid to use knives. How also should we reach the new world?"

Mira now 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 subdued as seen in the life of the cobbler woman. Unless women take up the "knife of justice", 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 a Rosamma. Thus Alexander

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suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. Alexander does not stop merely with the recording of female bodily trauma. This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women's movements that she witnessed in her formative years.

Rubin, (January 27, 1991)

CONCLUSION

Meena Alexander suggests that there is a possibility of the uplift of the poor and destitute if only a little bit of cooperation is found in every individual. Mira is an ordinary woman who is ready to embrace the subdued wherever she finds. Her heart wells up whenever she sees women being subdued in the hands of the cruel patriarchy. Her anger is beautifully canalized into positive actions and she is very much sure that there shall definitely be a cure though it may be a slow process. The novel ends with a positive note, Mira wishes a "heavy rain must fall" on the fire which had been lit in water. The small fire lit in water was the symbol of a small and powerful protest of the poor against the capitalist system. In Mira's dreams, this small fire grew and enveloped the whole pool.

"If fire is lit in water, who can extinguish it?"

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