

The Theme of Identity Crisis and Diasporic Consciousness in Meena Alexander's Novel *Nampally Road*

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Abstract

During the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, women were asserting their authority and significance as authors, as well as advocating for the recognition of women's lives as important subject matter. Notable female authors include Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, and Meena Alexander. Their works center on the psychological anguish experienced by women. The topics frequently revolve on the portrayal of the suppressed and marginalized existence of women belonging to the lower socioeconomic strata.

Meena Alexander is a writer who explores the social and political unrest in postcolonial India, specifically focusing on the emergence of neo-feudalism following the end of colonialism. Alexander's novella, *Nampally Road* (1991), explores the socio-political turmoil that occurred during the period of Emergency established by Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister of Independent India. The Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh exercise autocratic power.

Keywords; Postcolonial, Marginalization, Autocracy, Injustice, Poverty

Meena Alexander is an Indian writer whose literary works showcase her extensive exposure to many ethnic and religious communities across four continents, therefore reflecting her multicultural life experience. Alexander's works primarily focus on the interplay between place, memory, and language in the process of forming one's identity. She explores the different aspects of her heritage and the experience of being culturally uprooted, with a specific emphasis on her position as

an educated woman from the South Asian diaspora who resides and writes in the Western world.

Nampally Road, the novel, provides a vivid depiction of modern India and the arduous journey of a lady as she attempts to reconstruct her own history. Alexander's primary areas of study are cultural abundance, intricate psychological dynamics, feminism, and social politics. Nampally Road is a novel that explores the challenges faced by minority groups, with a particular emphasis on contrasting prior relationships and the cultural and historical legacy they inherit. Meena Alexander is a writer who explores the social and political unrest in postcolonial India, specifically focusing on the emergence of neo-feudalism following the end of colonialism. The indigenous population endures the negative impact of political leaders and undergoes the distress caused by political displacement, challenges related to their sense of self, and gender difficulties within their narrow social framework. The primary themes explored in her novels are societal trauma, political unrest, social turbulence, cultural hybridity, and personal psychological anguish.

Alexander's novella, Nampally Road (1991), explores the socio-political turmoil that occurred during the period of Emergency established by Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister of Independent India. The Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh exercise autocratic power.

The work is structured into 10 concise chapters that document the experiences of the female heroine, Mira Kannadical. It documents the firsthand accounts and views conveyed from the perspective of a female writer from the Diaspora who has recently returned to her home country following a four-year residence in the Western world. Mira's dissent is clearly demonstrated by her decision to return to her hometown and pursue the professions of teaching and writing, which yield her a little salary. This piece demonstrates her defiant stance against the established standards of the Diaspora population, which exhibits a voracious desire for employment prospects overseas. Despite conducting study, she ultimately decided against settling in England and instead chose to return and establish herself in India, namely in the periphery region of South India.

Durgabai Gokhale, the mother of Sidharth, lived in a mansion built by her father in Nampally road, some 70 years ago. Durgabai, who was an obstetrician, Gynaecologist and Peadetrician all rolled into one, gave vaccinations and medicines to young children and also attended to the special health problems faced by poor women folk. Though she had very few medical types of equipment in her clinic but her clinic was a great comfort for the poor people as she didn't ask for any charges from them. She was well aware that the area surrounding her house was inhabited by extremely poor people. So when Mira, came to visit her as her friend in London, Sidharth had requested her, Durgabai insisted that Mira should stay with her. Mira accepted and started living in Durgabai's house as a paying guest. Mira the protagonist, of the novel was an Indian, though studied in England, found it difficult to adjust to the lifestyle of English. From an early, while still in India, Mira was accustomed to eating with her right hand, but English people never ate with their hands and used knife and fork for eating. They considered the Indian way of eating with bare hands and fingers as indecent. Mira was given the lessons in table manners and etiquettes by Miss foxglove, the daughter of the hostel warden. Mira followed Miss foxglove's example of holding her knife in right hand and fork in left to swallow food gracefully and to drink wine with meals but failed miserably. She heard Miss Foxglove commenting that though Mira was a brilliant child, but out of place in Midlands, (*Nampally Road*, Ibid 61)

When Mira got an opportunity to teach in a school in Hyderabad, she gladly accepted it in the hope that going to India would give her a chance to get a clear understanding of her own self. Once in India, she felt at home and realized that she would achieve her full potential only in her own country. Wordsworth, the great English poet, became her role model as she felt that he understood suffering and desire which could not leave a person free. She started teaching English Literature at Sona Niwas College, Hyderabad and quickly became a favorite of the students. In her free time she attempted to write poems though in her mind she was still confused as to her real identity and purpose in life.

The plight of ordinary/common people under Limca Gowda's rule –

When Mira came to India from England, Limca Gowda was the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. He was an autocratic ruler and dominated the opposition in a cruel manner. To rule the state in totalitarian manner, he had created a special secret police organization called as Ever ready men. They wore khaki uniforms and used to move around on motorcycles. Limca Gowda's policies were not people friendly, as he imposed heavy taxes on poor farmers due to which they found it hard to survive. About one hundred men and women under the association of 'Orange sellers of Telugu Desham' holding red flags and shouting slogans against the Chief Minister marched in a procession. Mira and Ramu, watching from the window of Bholaram's new Mysore Café witnessed that within a few minutes of the protest march, the Ever ready men arrived on motor cycles and started attacking the orange sellers with lathis and kicking them and very soon the whole procession got scattered and dispersed. The poor people lived in extremely pathetic conditions under the rule of Gowda. Even basic health facilities were not available to them. Makarand Paranjape captures this tone of the Diaspora narrative:

It is a city of riots, senseless violence, state repression, rape and fantasy – in short, a nightmarish place. It is not that none of these happen in reality, but that much else also does; in Alexander's book, nothing else seems to happen. This lack of proportion suggests that Alexander has succumbed to the easy temptation of painting in pre-selected lurid colours the geography of a Third World place. (Paranjape: 1992: 30)

Injustice was rampant. There was no drinking water, no schools, and no roads in the villages. All the money extracted from the people in the name of taxes went to strengthen CM's hold in the state. Elaborate and exorbitant celebrations were to be held on the occasion of his 60th birthday as he wanted to achieve popularity of NGR who was his rival and former CM of Andhra Pradesh. Wide spread corruption and injustice was not limited to Hyderabad or Andhra Pradesh only but the whole country was under its spell. The PM herself was a dictator who had declared National Emergency so as to suppress and dominate the opposition parties. CM Limca Gowda was one of her persons and was called frequently by her

to Delhi for political observations and decisions. For his travel to Delhi, elaborate and expensive arrangements were made to beautify the roads and the airport. For these temporary arrangements large amounts of money were spent repeatedly which further hindered the development of poor. The CM's convoy for each visit used to be massive. Though the people were desperate yet they could not protest publicly for the fear of police force used against them, so they came together in a secret and underground organization to work against Limca Gowda. Seeing the injustice and corruption all around them, Ramu and Mira too joined and became active workers of this secret organization.

Significance of Rameeza's suffering in the novel-

Rameeza be, and her husband lived in a village on the mountain. They came to Hyderabad to see the celebrated movie, 'Isak Katha' at Sagar Talkies. After the movie finished, it was dark outside and they started walking towards the house of their relative where they were staying. They were stopped on the road by a group of drunken policemen and when her husband questioned about the reason for their halt, he was violently bashed and his brain was beaten out while Rameeza was raped by all the policemen. The dead body of her husband was recovered from the well behind the police station and was identified by his brother who was a lorry driver. Slowly the rumors spread that Rameeza Be was raped and her husband murdered and she was being held captive in the police station so as to hush up the whole matter and destroy the evidence of the crime. When Ramu went to the Gowliguda Police station and enquired about Rameeza, they became angry and threatened Ramu to stay away from the matter. But in a short time the rumors spread and angry people got organized in small groups and marched towards the Gowliguda police station and attacked the gracious old British style building. The people marched into the various cells till they found Rameeza imprisoned and lying on the floor of one of the cell. The angry mob broke the cell and took Rameeza to Maitray's Amma's house. The angry mob then emptied various bottles filled with kerosene into the police station, lit a match stick and burned the fine old wooden building in a short span of few minutes. Soon Ever ready men arrived onto the scene but by that time the old wooden building had burned down and the mob had also dispersed. But soon the riots spread to the other parts of the city as now

the students also took an active part in the protest movement and the law and order situation deteriorated to such an extent that curfew had to be imposed for several days till the situation returned to normalcy. After which the birthday preparations of CM Limca Gowda commenced with a procession of Elephants and horsemen amid the sound of trumpets and horns. The life history of Gowda starting from his birth, childhood and youth were dramatized on the stage by introducing and enacting popular myths and stories. The last act was to be performance by film stars singing praises of CM. A huge cardboard model of ancient city of Hyderabad was mounted on the stage. During last scene, a cracking sound was heard then a flame of fire was seen and within minutes the entire stage was engulfed in flames. There was a huge commotion and people began to run for their lives. There was a crackling sound explosion and soon thousand of wires, bulbs and other decorations began to explode and were scattered all over the place. The firemen could not control the spreading fire and all the people gathered. Society matrons, politicians, leaders, soldiers, women and poor folks began to run around searching for an escape. The grand stage and all the equipment which had taken months to plan, prepare and put up were demolished in a matter of minutes. Mira took refuge in the lotus pool behind the public garden and found that the pool itself was burning; looking at the strange sight she was reminded of the ancient saying of Nagarjuna that if there is fire in water then no one can extinguish it.

The people of Hyderabad had avenged the rape of Rameeza and brutal murder of her husband by destroying the elaborate, exorbitant and ambitious birthday preparations of CM. When Mira reached Durgabai's mansion she was informed that Ramu who was behind the planning and organization of the dangerous anti-government activities is alive and safe. Mira also got the good news that Rameeza has recovered from her serious illness. At that moment Mira felt that there still remained hope of better times to come for the poor people of Hyderabad.

The women depicted in the book embody all sectors of society, social classes, and educational backgrounds. However, they are united by the feminist principle of caring, which is rooted on shared comprehension and compassion. They transcend their social, cultural, and educational boundaries and provide mutual assistance. One can observe a communal catharsis in them.

Mira assumes an active role in the ongoing social unrest occurring in Hyderabad. By empathizing with the anguish and distress experienced by female characters such as Durgabai Gokhale, Rameeza Be, Maitreyi, and Rosamma, she delves into their many identities and takes on their burdens. Mira separates her sense of identity and endeavors to reestablish it among the other women in the story. By including the concerns of Mira's group, the personal story transforms into a communal and collective experience.

The tale portrays the plight of Mira, a prodigious artist, as she battles against political injustice, corruption, and persecution perpetrated by politicians. Unbeknownst to her, she adopts the position of an adversary and joins the crowds in their rebellion against the governmental authority. The struggle between politicians and creative authors is exemplified by Rushdie.

He states: 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.' (Rushdie: 2010: 14). Writers and politicians are inherently antagonistic. Both factions want to shape the world according to their own ideals, and they engage in conflict over the same geographical area. The novel serves as a means of refuting the official narrative and the politicians' interpretation of fact. Nampally Road serves as a record of individual, societal, group, and political uprooting.

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