



Meena Alexander: Tracing the Diasporic, Social and Cultural Aspects of her Poetics

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ABSTRACT

Poetry has been the main source of expression since years. There is no doubt that Meena Alexander also finds poetry as a suitable medium for the expression of her diasporic feelings. She has been considered as a representative of specific Indian Christian woman writing in English. Her poetry is a multifarious mingling of the Indian and immigrant experiences. The issues of identity formation and recalling are crucial for her. In her poetry, she opines her views regarding people's behaviour which has been prejudiced by their social and cultural surroundings. The social and cultural issues of transcendental, spiritual, corporeal, passionate, functional, including all people's way of communicating and understanding are the wide-ranging study material of her poetry. This paper explores how social, cultural and diasporic perspectives are mirrored in the poetry of Meena Alexander.

Keywords: - Social and Cultural Perspectives, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Identity, Race, Society, and Tradition, Profile Discrimination and Custom.

Introduction

Social, cultural, and diasporic perspectives are pervasive themes in Meena Alexander's poetry. Like other poets of India, she has also expressed her thoughts about migrant concerns, oppression, and marginalization. In her poetry, she tries to understand and explain human behaviour and development by investigating the processes of the social and cultural groups and communities of which she as an individual is a member. She reveals the fact that a person's belonging to a particular caste, religion, and gender dictates him to interact with others and act in a certain way. Meena Alexander is also not untouched by this. The effect of her stay in different countries is visible in her poetry. A close reading of her poetry proves that she was deeply connected to the Indian heritage, as her poetry is a fine blend of social and cultural Indian traditions and values. She was a true migrant poet and her poetry is filled with themes of displacement and transportation, isolation, and loneliness. In her poetry, she speaks audaciously and confidently about the lingering cultural influences of her home country and the racial hegemony of western countries.

Her poems show that she was well aware of the social and cultural conditions and differences in the places where she lived. Through her poetry, she expresses her feelings and concern toward everyday occurrences. She did not leave untouched any social and cultural Indian issues and events of her time. Perhaps that is why she can be called the representative Indian poet of her century, writing in English. Meena Alexander is one of those migrant women poets who had such a sense of prophecy that she could write against social evils and also about the migrant experiences she faced in her life. Diasporic sensibility, the search for one's roots, the feeling of exile at home and abroad, the search for identity, the feeling of being uprooted, and casteism are also prominent aspects of his poetry. Like other expatriate poets, she too preserves a collective memory, hallucination, or myth about her original homeland—its physical fragment and activities and sufferings—in her poetry. As a genuine diasporic voice, she articulates her own lived diasporic experiences of relocation and emigration; migration and commotion; The departure and loneliness that he has in his travels from India to abroad. Besides, she expresses her feelings of violence, disorder, and injustice in how she has been swapped into another country's capitalist society.

The sense of identity, the problem of separated identity and loss of language, and racial and cultural differences are explored and held together in his poetry. For example, her *The Bird's Bright Ring*, on the one hand, is mixed with the poet's reflections on exile, emigration, and the human condition in a disordered world, on the other hand, her *I Root My Name* is set aside by a gloomy, the tension of sadness, which stems from being separated from one's motherland and beloved grandparents at a very young age. If her *Without a Place* tackles the problem of exile, her *Stone Roots* illuminates a dark tale of mourning over exile and incarceration. Whereas in *The House of a Thousand Doors*, Alexander represents the two grandmothers, paternal figures. *The Storm: The Palm in Five Parts* also describes a story of exile, emigration, displacement, and displacement. Her collection, *The River and the Bridge* deals with the theme of exile and loss. *The Unlettered Heart* portrays exile and its effect on the poet's imagination. In her *Raw Silk*, she reflects on the aftermath of 9/11 in relation to immigration status. Meena's poetry has been closely related to her migration.

Reminiscence, Glumness, and Gangrene

Much of Alexander's writing explores elements of diaspora, displacement, exile, multiples, identity, and allegiance. Her poetry satirizes the loss of her birthplace after a self-imposed exile. Her main concern in her literary work is the physical and emotional effects of the diaspora. The sense of belonging is one of the major concerns of diasporic discourses. The theme of loss and homesickness resonates in the poetic work of Mina Alexander. In her poetry, she laments for estrangement and lost memories of her motherland's glory. The main theme of her *I Root My Name* is the sadness and depression that comes after leaving her birthplace and beloved grandparents.

Old reminiscences of her mother represent her diasporic longing and memory of her family member and home. Love for the motherland and grandmothers becomes her theme and sorrow of separation from them is reflected in the poem like- 'Looking through Well Water.' In the poem, 'Narcissus never Knew Her' the poetess speaks about the sense of 'otherness' being on the periphery of the dominant culture. While living in New York, her sense of identity was invaded by the gaze of 'otherness' and it made her nostalgic. The despair and all negative feelings of loss and lamentation burst into the form of her poetry. Alexander's work provides a launching pad to reflect and act on these problems in American society. The note of anguish disillusionment and alienation is found exquisitely in the poem "Night Scene, the Garden" where the image of barbed wire reflects the predicament of female immigrants:

My back against barbed wire

Snagged and coiled to belly height

X X X X X

No man's land

No woman either.

I stand in the middle

Of my life.

X X X X

Minute inscriptions

of our blood and race...". (*Fault Lines* 129-130)

In this poem, describing the pangs of isolation and subservience of the immigrants, Alexander also throws light on why these immigrants cry for the past and the lost. Regarding this, she expresses her nostalgic feelings in 'Her Garden',

I remember her

She died so long

before my birth

that we are one, entirely

as a sky.

dissolved by sun and star (*House of a Thousand Doors* 5).

Mina Alexander searches for her identity amidst a world that always labels and identifies people based on race, colour, and nationality. At one place she opines her views, that being in America, she has to follow American culture:

No flim-flam now; card sharp, streetwise

I fix my heels at Paul's shoe place for a dollar fifty

X X X X X X X X

Shall I bruise my skin, burn up into

She Who Is No Color. whose longing is a crush

of larks shivering without sound? (*River and Bridge* 29)

She maintains ties to her homeland and country via her poems as a diasporic poet. In her poems, she reveals how a diasporic poet's sense of identity is established and bolstered by imagery from his or her country's past and history. She also pulls imagery from her home and country by fusing them with memory and nostalgia, like the majority of other diasporic poets. Her diasporic poetry incorporates a great amount of autobiographical expression. She

strives to root her name in the ancestral land through *I Root My Name* because she is aware that although her life is on fire, her ancestral land is forever. The poem '*I Root My Name*' explains her diasporic sensibility engrained in grandfather's house;

This peepled street's my homing ground

You cannot exile me from here

people tend it

even though they have no words

to say so (*I Root My Name* 23)

Thoughts of rootlessness continue to swirl in her head, spilling out upon her hiding spots like daring hummingbirds. The main issues in diasporic writing have been location, displacement, and the longing for home. In addition, language is another issue that immigrants deal with. Because they learn a new language as a result of living in another country, their native tongue is destroyed. Expressing her lament regarding the loss of language Meena Alexander writes;

Our language is in ruins

vowels impossibly sharp

broken consonants of bone

She has no home (*River and Bridge* 23)

In another poem titled 'Lost Language', she expresses an intense longing for the lost language. She writes:

It comes in flight

towards me

brushing against

an old stone wall

father's father raised

Language so fine

it cannot hold the light

for long and beats

as water might... (*River and Bridge* 29)

She seems to be discussing how the language's colonial influences have split her sense of self or identity in this passage. Her poetry demonstrates the lack of a single language that an immigrant may claim as his or her own.

Identity, Dilemma, Racial Discrimination, Social and Cultural Differences

Her poetry weaves in and out of the problems and intricacies of the modern world. Her priorities include challenges with identity formation, racial discrimination, and social and cultural diversity. She constantly needs to defend herself in America, including her place of birth, her line of work, and other details. As immigrants must repeatedly demonstrate their dedication to the host nation, this is a challenge that not only Alexander but all immigrants have had to deal with. She needs to identify herself as a poet if she wants to write poetry in America. She occasionally gets inquiries about her nationality, such as whether she is American or Asian-American. Alexander interweaves the environment of her rhymes with the help of her own lived experiences. She is passionately involved in discovering herself while scraping boundaries and definitions of identity. as she once admits,

I am a poet writing in America.

But American poet?...

An Asian-American poet then?...

Poet tout court?...

A woman poet, a woman poet of colour

a South Indian woman who makes up lines in English...

A Third World Woman poet...? (Fault Lines 193).

It also shows that an immigrant's poetic creation gets effected by his/ her coated life of an expatriate. It always dwindles into the state of being without a place as she depicts in the poem 'Songs without Place'. The poet's effort is to establish identity from a dull garden through scraping her heart's blood into poetry. Her poem 'Smoke on Water' speaks about the fragmented world of immigrants that is divided in two. The notion of identity has been fractured by multiple migrations. Therefore, the multiplicity of homes cannot give the sense of home and familiarity, and make the poet alienated and torn by memories and strains of dislocation. The poem 'Indigo' presents the compactness of loss caused by the dislocation. The 'Mirror of Earth' depicts the cracked poetic self and the poet's inability to sleep at night.

Racism is another significant feature of her poetry which is supposed to believe in the supremacy of one race over another, that includes the idea that human beings can be divided into different groups that are different due to their social behaviour and their distinctive aptitudes as well as the idea that they can be ranked as inferior or superior. Racial discrimination is often used to describe discrimination based on tradition or culture and religious profiling. Therefore, the definition of identity becomes the dismal necessity for the immigrant to face the fragmentation, racial and colour discrimination at every step. In her poetry, Meena also talks about the bitter experiences of racial discrimination, the cultural reinforcement of dress, behaviour, and attitude, which are considered as norms by the host country. She also points out an immigrant's inability to expressing the importance of his own needs and the constant desire for the host country's approval to legitimize his every action consigns him to secondary or subordinate roles. This prohibitive role creates stereotyping and racial discrimination. Meena finds racial discrimination is so strong in the United States. She describes that the impact of racial discrimination was on its full bloom after the 9/11 event, as at that time South Asians were targeted and treated badly. There was a dark covering of suspicions for all brown people who looked like Arabs or non-American. At that time Meena Alexander had to attend a meeting of the Asian/ Americans Research Institute in October. Usually, she wore Sari while attending such a meeting but she was warned by her friends and students that it was not safe to put on a Sari. The poem 'Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Towers' deals with the ever-present threat of violence in the aftermath of the 9/11 which forces her to wear the western clothes on the street,

What a shame
 they scared you so
 you plucked your sari off,
 crushed it into a ball
 then spread it
 on the toilet floor.
 Sparks from the towers
 fled through the weave of silk.
 With your black hair
 and sun-dark skin
 you're just a child of earth.
 Kabir the weaver sings:
 O men and dogs
 in times of grief
 our rolling earth
 grows small. (web)

Thus, the experience of cultural otherness is intensified during the 9/11 aftermath. In her poetry, Meena Alexander also emphasizes that in America the Asian Americans faced violence, disorder, and injustice and they are haggled in a capitalist society of the West. Alexander through her poetry shows how the immigrants clash with false cultural pretensions of their own countries and also the racial hegemony of their host countries. The event of 9/11 and its aftermath: military retaliation and racial profiling of immigrants left a permanent traumatic effect on the inner self of the immigrants in the USA. Some of them were taken off and put in fetters. They were quite innocent but they were taken for terrorists because they were non-white. While living in New York, the sense of identity was invaded by the gaze of 'otherness' and it made her more nostalgic.

Meena Alexander specifies that a migrant's life is divided into the haunting past and chaotic present because of his separation from his home which results in a gloomy and nihilistic worldview. In her poem 'Translated Lives' she depicts the diaspora people whom she addresses as 'Translated Lives'. This poem delineates the dilemma of immigrants' who pretend to be what they are originally not. Just like a translated version of a text is not the original one, in the same way, the life which an immigrant leads in a host country is not rather an accepted one. The depression of loss of history, loss of identity

and of living in a multicultural society is not the poet's alone. Millions of immigrants have been facing such distress. The memories of the past directed towards self-exploration and delineation are constantly providing the poet, the shelter, and identity.

Social Issues and Her Poetry

Several studies analyse issues using the sociocultural perspective to account for changeableness from person to person and declare that social and cultural differences affect all the immigrants' life. Meena Alexander was quite aware of the social and cultural happenings. The impact of these socio-cultural changes is quite clear to her poetry. Her poetry provides a realm of social and cultural life. Like a true poet, through her poetry, she attempts to portray a real picture of human life, their suffering and their day to day events. She was a insightful poet who promptly wrote on the most complex social and cultural themes like -9/11 attacks on American World Trade Centre, Babri Masjid incident in Ayodhya, Godhra Carnage, Hindu-Muslim riots in Ahmedabad, multiple facets of violence, colonialism, religion, war, oppression, riots, cultural terrorism, love, humanity and problems of women of her time. For instance, seeing the annihilation which took place in the name of religion, she gets saddened and writes:

In Ayodhya, in Ram's golden name
 hundreds hacked to death, the domes
 of Babri Masjid quivering as massacres begin,
 the rivers of India rise mountainous,
 white veils of the dead, dhotis, kurtas, saris,
 slippery with spray, eyed from their bloodiness. (River and Bridge 86)

Meena saw the Civil War in Sudan with her bare eyes. She also viewed the butchery of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 and Hindu Muslim riots in Ahmedabad. When she was in the USA she experienced the terrorist attack on Twin Towers in New York. She was well aware of the geopolitical and socio-cultural happenings of the world she lived in. In her Raw Silk, she draws a realistic picture of New York after the 9/11 attack:

There is an uncommon light in the sky
 X X X X X
 with wings the color of dry blood.
 At the far side of the river Hudson
 X X X X X
 An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms
 sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky. (Raw Silk 9).

In another poem "Invisible City" she describes how was the atmosphere at the time when the towers destructed – the trees seem bruised and how the sky transformed into a different colour. She writes, "Tall Towers, twin towers I used to see/A bloody seam of sense drop free/By liberty street, on a knot of rubble" (Raw Silk 39). In the poem "The Pit Fire", she further describes the horrible scene of the 9/11 aftermath:

Flesh in fiery pieces, mute sediments of love.
 Shall a soul visit her mutilated parts?
 How shall a body be home? (Raw Silk 40)

Conclusion

Meena Alexander has established herself as a distinctive figure in the field of diasporic poets who has netted her experiences of life lived in a foreign country as an immigrant. She intensively broods over the themes of postcolonial diasporic discourse such as fanaticism, ethnicity, migration, terrorism, feminism, and racism from the female vantage point. In her diasporic poetry, she chains that in the postcolonial paradigm the territories are losing their significance and therefore fine-tuning as well as cooperation is essentially desired. As a wonderful compendium, her poetic volumes are suffused with

passionate and heart-breaking thoughts. Impregnated with the power of myth and inner violence with poetic grace, her lyrical beauty and vital thoughts with finely tuned are expressed with solidity in her volumes. All of them deal with the theme of alienation, accursed life of the modern man, disillusioned, exiled and one's separation from the motherland. The confrontation with the social, personal, cultural, and aesthetic dislocations makes her juxtapose the constantly changing situation with the dislocated past. Racial and cultural hybridity constitutes bizarre combinations of relationships, mindsets, sexual characteristics, class, race and ethnicity, drawn up from the far-off edges into the center. Meena's poetry reflects that hybridity and separation carry greater significance in diasporic discourse. Thus, Alexander's poetry is embodied with the full particulars of her many senses of exile and loss and struggles for survival from sufferings of dislocation. Her diasporic responsiveness dotted with cultural, social, is endlessly innovative. She looks back upon the lost time, places, languages, and past events and weaves them with the present-day experiences in her poetry.

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