Meena Alexander as a Diaspora writer

Dr. N. Nagabhushanam
Reader in English
M.R. College (A)
Vizianagaram

Abstract

Meena Alexander is ‘undoubtedly one of the finest poets of contemporary times’. She is known for lyric poetry that deals with migration, its impact on the subjectivity of the writer, and the sometimes violent events that compel people to cross borders. Though confronting such stark and difficult issues, her writing is sensual. She is a genuine diasporic voice expressing her own lived diasporic experiences in her poetry - uprooting and exile, migrant memories and trauma, separation and loneliness - all the way from India, Sudan and USA. She truly represents the history of global culture. She expresses her first hand experiences of how it looks and feels to have a split identity. She has undergone multiple identities in multiple places. Her autobiographical memoir, Fault Lines (2003) multiplies fragmented memories by relocations and remembrances, flights and motions, and is relentlessly marked by her endless quest for stability – at home and in exile. As she repeatedly emphasises her irresistible impulse to write since her childhood and particularly to write her self, I will attempt in this article to explore the importance of self-writing in diaspora. Consequently, I will argue that diasporic self-writing not only induces a therapeutic wholeness amidst disjunction and displacement, but also effectively de-creates and re-creates shifting and changing paradigms of the diasporic homes.

Key words: diaspora, identity, animality, transcultural

Introduction: Indian-American author Meena Alexander's autobiographical memoir, Fault Lines (2003). Multiply fragmented by relocations and remembrances, flights and motions, Alexander’s memoir is relentlessly marked by her endless quest for stability – at home and in
exile. As she repeatedly emphasises her irresistible impulse to write since her childhood and particularly to write her *self*, I will attempt in this article to explore the importance of self-writing in diaspora. Consequently, I will argue that diasporic self-writing not only induces a therapeutic wholeness amidst disjunction and displacement, but also effectively de-creates and re-creates shifting and changing paradigms of the diasporic homes.

Meena Alexander is an excellent diasporic writer. She is a writer of international acclaim who, with her global identity depicts the heart-wrenching tragedies that took place in New York and Gujrat, in her volume “Raw Silk”. The violence, cruelty, brutality in home (India) and in abroad (New York) make our blood run cold in the spine. The horrible impact of ethnic clashes, racism and dogmatism is portrayed here. We experience the terror and torture of hell as we go through the poems of “Raw Silk”. She unveils the naked reality of the present world in “Fragile Places” where she mentions the saying of Sankaracharya, the great philosopher of Advaita Vedanta: The world is a forest on fire. The peace, bliss and happiness of the world are always sacrificed on the altar of brutality, violence, animality and animosity. Humanity has lost its value.

The horror of ethnic struggle in Ahmedabad and the attack on New York’s World Trade Centre makes us numb. Harvard Review comments on “Raw Silk”: Alexander’s… collection… shares some of the qualities of silk: strong, vivid, resilient, marked with stubs, like the violence that is part of the texture of our cruel and anxious age… The poems… are vivid monuments to what we have lost and remembers of the enormity of what we have left to lose. The ubiquity of terror, the recurrence of “blood” image in “Raw Silk” reminds us of W. B. Yeats’s memorable lines in “The Second Coming”:

> Things fall apart; The centre cannot hold;  
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,  
> and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

Though Alexander was born in Allahabad, she had her English education in Khartoum. Her roots are in Kerala and Sudan where she spent her childhood. Later she went to Nottingham University to have the Ph.D degree. At present she is teaching in Hunter College, New York. She is a poet, a
novelist, a prose writer with transcultural and transcontinental ethos. The readers are unravelled the webs of complexity in her poems. The ethnic uprising, violence, class-clash are reflected in volumes of poetry like “The Bird’s Bright Ring” and “Raw Silk”. “Raw Silk” reveals the quintessential truth that though we are civilized, we have not overcome our basic instincts for cruelty and animality. The issues of exile, identity crisis, search for roots, migration are discussed from a much broader perspective. Human beings have been degenerated into its lowest stage. Meena Alexander says in “Fragile Places: A Poet’s Notebook” that once she went to Santiniketan, the realm of peace, the dwelling place of Tagore.

As a diasporic writer, Alexander explores themes of memory, migration, Diaspora and displacement in her diasporic work. Her creative work lies at the intersection of post colonial ethnic American, and women's studies. Like her life, which has included multiple border crossings, her poems crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries and generates interdisciplinary dialogues. Alexander is a genuine diasporic voice expressing her own life's diasporic experiences in her poetry uprooting and exile, alienation and identity, migrant memories and traumas, separation and loneliness all the way from India to Sudan and USA. She is christened as Mary Elizabeth but she has been called "Meena" since her birth and in her teenage she officially changed her name from Marry to Meena. She states, "I felt I had changed my name to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden" in her autobiography Fault Lines (74). Representing her own multi-lingual nature. “ Fifteen years old in Khartoum, I changed my name to Meena, What everyone knew me as, But just as important to me, The name under which I started to write poems.”

Meena Alexander is one of the foremost diasporic poets today. Her writing is lyrical, pageant and sensual, dealing with large themes including ethnic intolerance, terrorism, fanaticism and interracial tensions. Her poems are intensely self conscious and with minimum of words, she evokes layers of meaning. For her, poetry has important role to play in modern violence ridden world. She says in an interview with Ruth Maxey in Kenyon Review: “In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some ways to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist.”

As child, Meena wanted to be a circus performer after she had seen circus artists doing balancing acts in Gemini Circus. Then her grandfather and mother wanted her to be a medical
doctor and her father who was a scientist encouraged her to be a physicist. However, Meena turned to poetry at the age of eleven or twelve. For her, it was the music of survival. She admits that there is an inner voice that speaks to her. She feels that there is a girl child that resides inside her and she refuses to die. She writes in a chapter titled Lyric in a time of Violence in Fault Lines: "It seems to me that the lyric poem is a form of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem, I have to enter into a dream state. But at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense location to reflect on the world."

Meena Alexander’s poetry is marked by diasporic sensibility which finds highly emotion, charge expression in sensual, lyrical and metaphoric language. She has undergone multiple identities in multiple places. Her poems express her own lived experiences-uprooting and exile, migrant memories traveling to different places in India, Sudan and America. She has lived in different cities and towns like Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Khartoum, London, New York, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Trivandrum etc. In her memoir Fault Lines she writes about ethnicity and writing of poetry. She asks herself: who am I? Where am I? When am I? These are the questions all diasporic writers are required to mix amidst violent densities of place. In modern times, world overlap and one has co-existed in fluid diasporic world. The biggest challenge for a creative writing is to make a real integration between one's personal history and the experience in alien countries. Meena Alexander asks: “What does it mean to carry one's house on one's back”? . As a poet, she has to explain whether she is a poet writing in America. She feels that everything that comes to her is hyphenated and incomplete. She says that she is a women poet, a women poet of color, a south Indian Woman poet who makes up lines in English a past colonial language as she waits for the red lights to change on Broadway.

The multicultural world in America has been described very poignantly in her poem News of the World. “We must always return to poems for new of the world or polish for the lack Strip it block it with blood the page is not enough unless the sun rises in. Meena Alexander says that Frantz Fanon speaks of the barbed wire that exists in a colonized state. She believes that this "zone of occult instability" must be expressed in poetry of the diaspora which will act as a process of decolonization. The Asian Americans grapple with violence, disorder and injustice and they are bartered in capitalist society of the West.
Meena Alexander says that in America, the diasporic poets and artists press against the barbed wire of the racialism. Meena Alexander says that people call poets 'the creators of that small despised art'. As a poet, she picks up strands of memories and evokes them all. She feels that her ethnicity demands it. Past memories haunt her. In India, everything is colored with hierarchy, authority, and traditions. No one feels its burden. Only in America, she read about the pain of the post colonial heritage and the sufferings of women in India she says: "There is a violence in the very language, American English, that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned. After all, for such as we are the territories are not free. The world is not open. That endless space the emptiness of the American sublime to worse than a lie. It does ceaseless damages to the imagination. But it has taken me ten years in this country even to get to think it."

In America, she came face to face with subtle form of racism and violence. She felt that true poetry must figure out this violence and give expression to it. For a writer, there are many kinds of death for example the loss of one's language or the forgetfulness of the body. In her collection of poems House of a Thousand Doors, the past took the form of an ancestor, a grandmother figure. She wanted to tear herself free from the past but it sucked her back in its vortex. Meena Alexander says that her ethnicity as an Indian American and in broader sense, an Asian American requires her to hold on to past resisting fracturing. For her, poetry has a higher role to play. She writes: "The struggle for social justice, for human dignity, is for each of us. Like ethnicity, like the labor of poetry, it is larger than any single person, or any single voice. It transcends individualism. It is shape by forces that well up out of us, chaotic, immensely powerful forces that disorder the brittle boundary lines we create, turn us towards a light, a truth, whose immensity, far from being mystical-in the sense of a pure thing far away, a distance shining - casts all our actions into relief, etches out lines into art."

As a teenager in Khartoum, Meena kept journals that contained quotes from Marcel Proust, Albert Camus, Wallace Stevens and her own poetry. Her mother insisted that women should accept the limitations imposed by their bodies and honour their femininity. Arranged marriage was a narrow gate that all women had to enter and learn certain skills required to run a household. In Kozencheri, girls could not get out without proper escorts. They were often molested in market places of Kerala. Meena had heard that sometimes women committed suicide.
to do away with their shameful bodies. These terrible images haunted her mind in her childhood. In her poem *Passion*, she poignantly describes the life of a woman:

I am she the woman after giving

birth life to give life torn

and hovering as bloodied

fluids baste the weakened flesh

**Conclusion:** To conclude, we can say Alexander’s works are marked by the sense of loss, the pair of exile and dislocation. Diaspora literature is the literature of the migrants, expressing their experiences and sense of displacement and loss of social constructs like nation, ethnicity, race, culture, language etc. their identity crisis, sense of alienation, nostalgia, loss and emptiness. They experience social isolation, cultural shock and stress. Therefore, in diasporic literature we come across the themes of emptiness, frustration, disillusionment, home sickness, racism and discrimination. Alexander’s poetry and writings are marked by all the aspects of diaspora.

**References**

2. King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets. OUP. India. p. 57-58.
5. Academic Journal article from Tri Quarterly.