



Quest for Identity in the Selected Poems of Meena Alexander

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Abstract-

Indian English Poetry has undergone illuminating changes after post-independence initiated by factors such as Globalization. Its far-reaching consequences has shifted the notions of language and identity and the ways of articulations. The notion of Indianness change its form when notions of identity and existence find new horizons. The question if identity and roots have always been a challenging force for immigrant people. They have to adjust themselves with new culture, atmosphere, people and so on. The objective of the proposed research study is to reflect on Meena Alexander who has been placed among great poets of the time writing on Indian Diaspora, identity and cultural roots she remembers. Meena Alexander's poetry will help to understand the writing of Indian Diaspora. Her poems are the finest example for this literary oeuvre and to be examined the lives of the migrated citizens of India who have a quest for their root, home and identity.

Key Words- Identity, Root, Home, Memory, Diaspora, Exile, Alienation, Language.

Poetry is a part of literary creation or literary writing that is the result of poet's imagination or emotions which leave its impression on the minds of the readers. The poet expresses his or her inner deepest emotions and feeling with most artistically by choosing and arranging language for its meaning, tone, sound and rhythm. Poetry as produced on other times and in other places, but twentieth century poetry from India is interlinked with numerous, often complicated ways to the world in which it is written, read, and circulated for the poetry lovers. Meena Alexander says in an interview:

In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist. I believe this very deeply and I see it as an effort to enter into the complications of the moment even if they are violent but through that, in some measure, the task of poetry is to reconcile us to the world-not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense. (188)

Meena Alexander, born in Allahabad was raised in India and Sudan. When she was eighteen, she went abroad for higher study and completed her PhD in British Romantic Literature. Presently she lives in New York City, where she is a Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her eight volumes of poetry include the collections, *Illiterate Heart* (2002), which won a 2002 PEN Open Book Award, and *Raw Silk* (2004).

She was awarded the Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature in 2009 by the South Asian Literary Association for contributions to American literature. In 2014, Meera Alexander was named as a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. She has received awards from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Arts Council of England, National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, National Council for Research on Women, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Ledig-Rowohlt Foundation in Switzerland.

Meena Alexander, an internationally acclaimed poet, truly represents the history of global culture. She expresses her first hand experiences of how it looks and feels to have a split identity. Her identity becomes an inspirational cause for her to pen her feelings for her memories. Meena Alexander has undergone multiple identities in multiple places as she has been travelling and living in different centuries: India, Sudan, USA and different cities and towns: Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Khartoum, London, New York, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Trivendrum etc.

Nostalgia for homeland, family and traditions of one's community is a recurrent trait in all diasporic poets. After immigration, all writers feel sick for their homeland and roots they belong. Their interaction with so many new country's people fill their heart with some respected and sometimes insulted feelings and behaviours. Arising from her collective migrations, Alexander's oeuvre investigates immigrant identity formation; issues of home and dislocation, especially as a result of war; the impact of multilingualism on literary production; the woman writer's growing to feminist consciousness within a postcolonial, patriarchal society; and the ongoing negotiation of a racialized, gendered experience of American life. Most of her writing explores themes of migrant, displacement, exile, multiple, identities and allegiances. Some of her works' themes are introduced in her early works of poetry - *The Bird's Bright Wing* (1976), *Without Place* (1978), *I root my Name* (1977) and *Stone Roots* (1980).

Meena Alexander tries to seek her identity through the figures of her maternal grandmother Kunju who defied the dictates of conventional feminine behaviour and became influential political activist. Meena Alexander searches for her own identity amidst a world that always labels and identifies people by race colour and nationality. For Meena Alexander, poetry is the music of survival and place is the instrument on which that music can be tuned with person's choice. She did not have a one single place to live, a place called home or the language she could call her own language. The principal theme of the collection is how identities are shaped, in different nations by languages and they merge with and inscribe female bodies. In a poem titled 'Fragments' Alexander writes feeling herself as:

I want to write:

The treasure bursting in to bloom

I felt it, though it did not come in that particular way, the sentence

end-stopped

could sense come in feverish script

finicky with rhyme, sharp as a wave? (2)

Meena Alexander poetry indicates diasporic sensibility which finds highly emotion, charge expression in sensual, lyrical and metaphoric language. In a poem titled *Lost Language*, she expresses an acute and excruciating 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 can not hold the light

for long and beats

as water might... (25)

Alexander's life and work embody the struggles that face the vast majority of Asian Americans – principally, gaining acceptance in a nation that has often perceived, and thus treated, Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, strangers, and outsiders. Alexander's literary and artistic fame paved a path for herself and fellow Asian Americans. Over the years, she has changed the definition of Asian American identity and, in the process, expanded the idea of what characterizes an American citizen and an American sensibility. While rooted in a range of experience, Alexander has never let her ethnicity reduce or limit her creativity and humanity in all the circumstances. 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 it

Old doctor wilily writes

crouched on a stop

in Paterson, New Jersey

I am torn by light

She cries into her own head

The players fields of death

are far from me. (14)

For Alexander, home resides in her memory through the creation of poetry, and her perception of permanent dislocation due to the diasporic nature. In '*After the Wedding*', the poet says that though she has such feminist feelings for marriage, love in her poetry brings for her the strong affection and personal attachment to her husband. She writes, "I did not think I could try to die/ When yesterday they hennaed my hands/ in the pattern of stars and moons/ and flowers of joy" (9). Her need to make sense of her place in the world and seek refuge in a single location drives her writing's focus on the languages, cultures, and experiences that have defined her life, from Sudan to England to India and the USA. Alexander openly speaks of her home with the urgency of one who writes to find it:

Home, coming home, perhaps this is what poetry does for us, we who are not very easily at home, not even in our own skins . . . Where is home? How can I answer that . . . It will take me another whole lifetime of writing poems to get there, and even then, of course, it will not be there. And perhaps that is the truth of it, that there is no there, where the question of home is concerned. (Poetics, 198)

Another reason is for the specific use of the term '*home*' used in this paper which doesn't convey meaning just as the physical place, but is based on some eternal or in the heart. In the words of Avtar Brah who defines as:

'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (Brah, 192)

Alexander possesses striking feelings about personal borders and lands, yet claims herself as an American identity:

Slowly it came to me, with the psychic work of migration, the need to become American, to take citizenship. I had come from one democracy and wanted to be fully part of another. I wanted to be able to vote. I tried to figure out what it meant, that curious word naturalization – as if something in my very being were going to be altered. I was anxious, fearing I would be plunged into a new, unknown life. (Poetics, 134)

River and Bridge (1996) is a collection of numerous poems that express nostalgia for root and homeland, memories of childhood and also monotonous life of a migrant in the USA. In one of the finest poems *Softly My Soul*, the poet describes the American Milieu:

Softly my Soul, softly my soul so softly
the herons have fled, but the planes keep coming.
Above Liberty's torch the sky is pink
And George Washington would laugh in his sleep
to mark the gazelles on Fifth Avenue
tiny miniskirts hoisted to their thighs. (17)

In America, she came interacted and faced with subtle form of racism and violence. In a poem *Muse*, Meena Alexander laments the ruin of 'our language' and the sense of having 'no home'. She says, "Our language is in ruins/ vowels impossibly sharp/ broken consonants of bone/ She has no home" (21).

In '*River and Bridge*' poem Alexander arouses thematic and ideological issues about the return to Indian roots in pure forms, the marginal self who interweaves through both Indian and foreign locations, and the crucial issue of assimilation into American culture. Problems of the containment of the Indian imagination in an alien landscape are sounded out in the poem. '*Relocation*' incites her to write about her root to return:

Scraping it all back:
A species of composition
routine as crossing streets
or taking out the garbage
nothing to blow the mind
.....
The mind held in a metallic fork—
its sense inviolate, the questions of
travel scored by icy borders,
the imagination ordering itself. (1 - 21)

The role of memory has always been pivotal so did with Meena's poetry with her new creation. Meera knows about the truth of oral power of poetry and cultural differences. She is often haunted by these terrible memories whenever she recounted her own past in separation. In her poem *Passion* she draws her theme from a woman's life who gives birth to another life but for her sacrifice, she was not honoured as there are no bronze, no summoning". Not even the words of sympathy and love.

Meena Alexander's migration memories make her feel robbing of her mother tongue and is sad about the illiteracy of her own language. She expresses her sorrow and sense of emptiness without a tradition and history on account of her immigrant life. Her poetry expresses the narrator's search for identity, homeland and root amidst a world that denominates people by race, colour, religion or ethnic group. In Meena Alexander's poetry, woman is brought back to life again and again retracing her root in own land.

Of course, poets are the torch bearers of compassion, sympathy, peace and love. Meena Alexander also exhales the fragrance of love, humanity, bonding, compassion and brotherhood through her writings for readers. Her poetry exhibits intense diasporic sensibility calling them as 'Fragile places'. After her return to homeland, she is perturbed by nostalgia and memory occasionally. Thus, Alexander's consciousness recalls her traditional and cultural identity through resources of memory, language, story, and myth. Reading her poetry is like visiting those places she has done in her life. These poems give her refreshing identity and a new root to her domain. Truly she can be addressed as diaspora's daughter of India.

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