



Meena Alexander: A Poet of War, Violence, Womanhood and Wistfulness

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Abstract:

Meena Alexander was a Diaspora writer of India. This paper deals with her last collection of poems titled 'Atmospheric Embroidery'. Themes of war, violence, womanhood and wistfulness echo throughout this complex and sensuous book of poetry. She spent her life on four continents, i.e., Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. This developed a strong sense of dislocation in her poems. She wrote about the war-torn area of Darfur in Sudan, her childhood places in India and her recollection of the past in New York, USA. She dexterously created images that go deep into multiple layers. It is not easy to comprehend her many poems as they delve into multiple meanings. She has very dextrously delineated the innocence of a child who was being detached from his/her motherland, who doesn't know how to deal with changed situations and impending threats. She delineated situations of conflict zones and living conditions there. She has also explained the emotions of a grown-up person who found on revisiting his childhood places completely changed. Womanhood has found a good place in her poems, in which the use of Sita's image is brilliantly done. The paper tries to analyse her few poems and delineate the major idea behind them, and explore Meena Alexander as one of the finest modern poets of English, hailed from India.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Violence, War, Wistfulness, Womanhood.*

Meena Alexander was one of the brilliant modern poets of English from India. She dwelt on the idea of dislocation over which she wistfully grieved. As a diaspora poet, she yearns for her past in India which she couldn't get back. Along with it, she explores themes like womanhood and violence. She faced a violent environment in Africa, which is reflected in her poems. Meena made a distinct identity for herself in the world of literature through her three collections of poetry. Among them, Atmospheric Embroidery is the latest. Unfortunately, Meena passed away in 2018, but before leaving this world, she left a treasure to cherish for English literature students and readers. This paper focuses on elements of war and violence, womanhood and wistfulness in her poetry.

War and Violence

Violence in the poems of Meena Alexander can be divided into two parts: one that emanates from war, and the second, which is inflicted on women. Meena Alexander went to Sudan at the age of five along with her family. She faced both war and violence in Sudan. There was a crisis going on due to the conflict between North and South Sudan. It was the time of the First Sudanese War. In her poem 'Nurreddin', she delineates an image of a bomb falling and the ruckus it creates in the general public. She portrays a picture of a bomb falling and how people and animals sought shelter.

From the cloud-ship Antonov drops fell
We ran to the wadi, many people came.
Creatures too, camels, dogs, cats with no fur
Birds with torn wings. (Lines 7-10)

Such a chaotic and fearful picture of the falling of a bomb certainly sends a tremor through the heart. She gives a glimpse of unstable conditions in Sudan. Cats with no fur and birds with torn wings make war such an enemy of life on earth, which can't even have mercy on tender animals and birds. It sends one and all into the claws of death. The falling of a bomb is a sight of death in every manner. It is shown realistically in a narrative manner by Meena Alexander. She is a poet who doesn't mince words while describing destruction. It is such a coincidence that Nurreddin in the poem is the name of a boy who describes the meaning of his name as light of the day, and by the same name, i.e., Nureddin Mazeni, a UN advisor came as a supporter of the peacekeeping force in Sudan in 2006.



In another poem, 'Darfur notebook,' Meena illustrates pictures drawn by children. These pictures embody images of war and destruction. Lines like 'Everything is emptied out' (Line 4), 'Ravaged – blunt / Dashes of red / Men and women mingle' (Lines 6-8), 'a bomb' (Line 10), 'a desolation' (Line 12) show what images comprise. They tell the blunt reality of war through the prism of children. Meena explored different ways to show the after effects of wars; from narrating incidents through poems, as done in 'Nurreddin', to showing horrendous glimpses of destruction through drawings of children in the poem 'Darfur notebook'. Similarly, in the poem 'There she stands', also war images are shown through drawings of children. In this poem, even God is mentioned as a mere spectator of such destruction when Meena writes: "Celestial now Witnessing damage" (Lines 15-16). Unfortunately, the supreme power found itself helpless in the face of human actions. Humanity is shredded by the very acts of humans.

Meena Alexander, being a feminist writer too, raised her voice against violence against women. She highlights a horrific incident against humanity and women in particular, i.e. Nirbhaya (alias) rape case, in her poem 'Moksha'. The title of the poem is ironic, as Moksha in the Hindu religion is a stage when the soul is relieved from the cycle of birth and death after balancing the dues of karma (Olivelle). But the manner of moksha given to Nirbhaya was cruel, inhuman, and soul rending. Meena might have given this title due to the inappropriateness of the land for women. Women face all sorts of atrocities, inequalities and discrimination. Under such a situation, getting relieved from life is better than living it. Meena says that the bus stop from where Nirbhaya took that bus in which she was brutally raped was the same place where Meena herself used to stand at the tender age of 23. It was the time when she was newly appointed to the vocation of Higher Education. The Nirbhaya incident sent tremors not only in the whole of India but also in the rest of the world. Meena narrates the incident and the fighting spirit of the Nirbhaya in such a delicate manner: "A young thing, raped by six men in a moving bus / (She fought back with fists and teeth)" ("Moksha", Lines 22-23).

The way she represents Nirbhaya as 'a young thing' and mentions her own age as '23' during her dwelling days at that bus stop was to indicate the horror she also felt during her times while taking the bus from there, and she can also relate to the situation of waiting and travelling at such unsafe places.

Womanhood

Meena's poetry reflects womanhood quite evidently, but it is essential to understand first what womanhood is. Womanhood is more centred on individual characteristics of being a woman. The famous writer Simon De Beauvoir has written in *The Second Sex* that 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman' (De Beauvoir 14). It is a controversial statement in the modern sense, as biology refutes it. But it defines the psychological framing of a woman. How things culturally are associated with women. Such as a woman is always ready to sacrifice herself for the near and dear ones, she is timid, weak, beautiful, submissive, etc. This psychological image, which describes a woman, is considered womanhood. In the poem 'Inwood Sita', Meena carves an image of a common woman or girl and tries to establish parallels with Sita. She establishes that a common woman, whether she lives in the USA or India, has to face all those challenges and troubles that Sita faced. She tries to delineate womanhood by first putting a common girl, most probably a manhole cleaner, in place of Sita. There she draws an ingeniously comparative image of Sita choosing to go underground after she was disillusioned by her husband Ram and the society, and a girl chose to go into a manhole. Meena writes:

Rama cast her out,
Lava storms cooled her
Dirt cloaked her,
A shimmering stole ("Inwood Sita", Lines 9-12).

Here, Sita, being an embodiment of womanhood, is forced to go underground, i.e., sacrifice herself. Ram is a common male of patriarchal society who not only cast out Sita but that every woman who is bound to face patriarchal orders to fulfil societal obligations. A woman faces all the storms of society, which follow after castigation; these storms make her acclimatize to such conditions, and she is left numbed. She is cloaked with so-called 'dirt' in the eyes of society, which becomes permanent clothing for that woman.



Along with this, there is another layer of interpretation where Meena Alexander dexterously interchanges herself with Sita when she writes:

Dry ground cracks,
Swallows her whole.
Sita-found-in-a-field
Fled to Inwood (Lines 5-8).

Meena, who was born in India—Sita in mythology, found in the field to her father ‘Janaka’, hence considered born in the field—was immersed in Indian soil but fled to outside here to Inwood, USA. In this manner, she indicates that a woman is forced to leave her native place due to inhospitable conditions there.

In another poem of *Atmospheric Embroidery* titled ‘Green leaves of El Fasher’, Meena Alexander expounds the treatment of non-Arabic people in general and women in particular in Sudan during the Darfur crisis. She writes: “I am not an animal, / They are more free, birds in the tree, horses too” (Lines 9-10).

She explains how men treated women in Sudan. Women did not have much freedom. They were bound with many restrictions. But the manner of treatment was ironic, like they forced women to unveil their faces and beat them when they unveiled them. It is normal in a war-torn or civil crisis region for women to face such atrocities. Women have always been the receiver gender, whether it was during the 1947 partition or Bangladesh war or any Middle East or African crisis. Similarly, in Sudan, Meena writes that women remained mere symbols who were addressed with feminine prefixes or suffixes such as ‘alif, ba, taa, mim’.

Wistfulness

Meena Alexander was born in Kerala and spent her starting years of childhood in India. At the tender age of five, she was taken to Sudan with her family. Later on, she lived in England for higher studies and in the USA as a citizen. In a way, she lived on four continents. This shifting of home from across continents created a sense of dislocation in her life. She, like other Diaspora writers, yearned for her homeland and memories of childhood. Firstly, we have to understand what being a diaspora is. As wistfulness has its source of origin in being a diaspora.

Diaspora term was specifically used for the forced migration of Jews from their homeland, but now this term has taken metaphoric meaning for varied types of people who have been dislocated from their places (William 83-99). So in a nutshell, ‘diaspora’ is a term “refers to any considerable ethnic population who are migrated and settled in other countries, living outside their traditional homeland, sharing common bonds and subsequent developments in their culture and ethnic identity” (Reddy).

Hence, due to dislocation from her homeland, Meena constantly remains wistful in her poetry. She sees her Indian home as something precious that has been left behind and lost from her life. When she revisits her childhood belongings after a long period of decades, she found them totally changed or vanished. She writes in the poem ‘Tarawad’ about her connections with relations and intimacy with homes that “I am a creature of house and home / Bound by a cord of blood” (Lines 2-3). She again reiterates her both physical and mental connection with childhood:

Unseen Umbilicus
That tethered me
Even as the ocean
Swept on and on (Lines 13-16).

She focuses on two things here, first, that she kept on dislocated across oceans and second, that she is still connected with that home by an invisible umbilicus. This connection brings Meena again to her childhood places, but she finds them completely lost. She comes to know that her house had been sold, the laburnum tree was gone, and there were no Jamun and Jarcanda trees either. She was having a feeling of utter loss. She visits the house and starts to search for her room where she slept, the doors were stuck in want of movement. She was distorted and writes “Crazy girl, inconsolable! / Where is she



now?” (Lines 21-22). She had lost her belongings. Her memories couldn't be renewed now. Her umbilical cord was severed from the origin. In another poem titled 'Hyderabad Notebook', Meena visits many other places of Hyderabad that belonged to her childhood and found them lost. She goes to a cafe, but there was now a Reebok store. She finds a university turned into a hospital, Nampally road, known for booksellers, is now a crowded place from where books have gone. She started to think that childhood was a dream, and she would never be able to know how it was. Now, on sensing the reality, all the dreamy images have broken into nothingness. There was nothing to connect with them now.

This sense of dislocation and losing the connection is depicted through all those things also who were brought to a foreign land along with Meena Alexander. In the poem 'Bright Passage', Meena mentions Grandfather's sari, coil's cry, a scrap of khadi spun by Grandfather, all pictures of the album started to question Meena gloomily "Why have you brought us here?" (Line 7).

This question in itself is a cry from Meena herself as to why she has been brought to that foreign land. This was not her homeland. How would she be able to connect with it? This sense of loss is going to stay there now forever. In a nutshell, these four prominent themes of i.e., War, Violence, Womanhood and Wistfulness, cover comprehensively poetry of Meena Alexander in the collection *Atmospheric Embroidery*.

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