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Meena Alexander's Illiterate Heart and Quickly Changing River : The Journey of a Homebound Pilgrim

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Abstract

Meena Alexander is an emerging Indian-English poet. She lives in the USA at present. She is a writer of collections of poetry like “Illiterate Heart”, “Raw Silk” and “Quickly Changing River”. “Quickly Changing River” is a quest for home. It is luminous with all the weather and warmth of childhood days in her homeland. In this collection she journeys down the memory lane to find her roots and establish her identity. She tries to harmonize her fragmented experiences in a colourful collage. Her poems reflect an acute tension between her past and present.

Keywords: Diaspora, Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism, Transcultural, Indian English Poet

Article

Meena Alexander's lines are like “fire in an old man's sleeve,/coiled rosebuds struck from a branch/ our earthly world slit open”,(Arthur Sze ,web) . One can hear the heartbeat of a homebound pilgrim in “Quickly Changing River”, “House of a Thousand Doors”, ‘Illiterate Heart’ and “The Bird's Bright Ring’. In “Raw Silk”, Meena Alexander heart bleeds to depict the ethnic violence in home and abroad .She is a multicultural artist. Her poetry is the garland of her transcultural experiences. She is a major postcolonial Indian English poet. She is an excellent diasporic poet, novelist and prose writer. She perambulates between her past , her long lost home and her present. She always craves for her home in India and Sudan. In “Fault Lines :A Memoir”, she lays bare her honest confession that she is a woman cracked by multiple migrations. She is uprooted so many times that she can connect nothing to nothing. Her poetry is her endless search for roots. In “The Travellers” She clarifies her her position as a transcultural and transcontinental poet:

Bahrin, Dubai, London , New York
homes thicken and crack
as fate is cut and chopped
into boarding passes . (9)

She reflects upon her fragmented life in “Old Ivory”: “ I try to imagine life in another country, our birth peninsula , broken in two.” (99).

“Diaspora” comes from the Greek word ‘diasperien’, dia means ‘across’ and sperien means to sow or scatter the seeds. Diaspora indicates the displaced and dislocated communities who have been uprooted from their native homeland through the movements of migration or exile. Meena Alexander unlocks her heart to share her feelings of isolation, alienation or loneliness with her readers. She has spent her life in four different countries like India, Sudan, London and New York . Her discomfiture in her exilic condition gets a voice in “No Man's Land”, where she muses on her existence in a no man's land.

“Illiterate Heart”, winner of a 2002 PEN Open Book Award is redolent with the weathers of childhood. In “Port Sudan”, she recalls the image of her dear father calling her from her childhood home Sudan . Though the poet is in America, her heart remains in her homeland . The warm father-daughter relationship is portrayed in all its beauty and fragrance. The age-old feelings of the caring father are universalized in Meena Alexander's pen. She remembers in “Port Sudan” :

I hear my father's voice on the phone ,
he wants me to come from America to see him
he does not want to die and be put in the earth
my sweet father: who held me high above the water
of the red sea when I was five...(Alexander, 2002,10)

The poet imagines to be wandering in the mysteries of Egypt. The image of the dying Pharaoh murmuring to his fellow men is an unfading reality to Meena:

If I forget upper Egypt
cut off my right hand
Here lies memory . [Alexander, 2002. 10]

‘Memory’ is the keynote in Meena's formation of ‘Self’. Memory floats her to the land of Pharaoh. Like her own father Pharaoh was an affectionate father. So says Meena about the Pharaoh that the same man loved his daughter too .

“Elegy for my Father” brings the images of her dead father , Karachi and India. She is quite inseparable from her memory of loving father. Though she is physically detached from her natiaveland , she is always emotionally attached to it .The memory of her dead father lying on the funeral pyre is something unforgettable.:

Father , when you died your bones
were brittle fit to burn .
they stretched you on a teakwood bench .
light etched your cheekbones, ... (Alexander, 2002. 12)

Meena’s father was an able bodied man when the partition of India and Pakistan took place. She cherishes the memory of her father passionately”

You were the age I am now
a man for all climates ,
hot streams , monsoon rivers, the indigo sea,
when they cut India in two
they made you choose. (Alexander, 2002. 13)

The poet indicates her present life in a foreign land :

Father it is a year since you died .
The past makes sparks and fragments
Pour in my eyes.
I am in another country ,
east of ours, an island
at the rim of the south China sea . .(Alexander, 2002. 15)

In “Reading Rumi as the Phone Rings”, she fondly recalls her period of pregnancy when her father appeared in her imagination to suggest her unborn child’s name . The bond between the father – daughter is something imperishable. She articulates:

One night in America , when my belly was huge as a furnace ,
when I couldn’t tell the door out of the dark
I saw the phone line spark
it was father : Why not call your son Abraham? .(Alexander, 2002.17)

The poem “Muse “is one of the most impotent poems of “Illiterate Heart”. The poetic muse is a part of Meena’s life from her early childhood.She accompanies the poet as throughout her life as unfailing friend.The poet loves to ponder over her muse:

I was young when you came to me ,
each thing rings its turn,
you sang in my ear , a slip of a thing
dressed like a convent girl -
white socks, shoes,
dark blue pinafore, white blouse. .(Alexander, 2002.23)

In “Civil Strife”, the images of “black water drew me home / In my own country”. (Alexander, 2002.35), of cotton ,linen made the poet meditative. In “Indigo”, she harks back to her homeland in her imagination:

O muse of my migrancy
black rose
of the southern shore
...
I search for myself
in the map of indigo . .(Alexander, 2002.35)

“Quickly Changing River” is Meena Alexander’s latest collection of poems published in 2008. The title is significant. The river has the capacity to cut its path through difficulties and obstacles. It keeps the natural rhythmic track. In “Quickly Changing River” the readers are acquainted with so many obstacles and hurdles in Meena’s life. Her experiences in India, Sudan, London and New York are not unhampered by troubles. But she rose confidently through the hazardous journey of her life. The poem “Cosmopolitan” begins thus:

You want a poem on being cosmopolitan
dear friend, what can I say? (Alexander, 2008.3)

Life in a cosmopolitan country truly confusing to her . She speaks from her the present land of stay: “Where stones surrender to the hunger of exile/Yesterday I jumped the metal door confusing D train for A. (Alexander, 2008. 3). Kashi, the Hindu pilgrimage comes to her mind. She suffers from identity crisis:

Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?

If I could would I return to Kashi? (Alexander, 2008. 3)

“Torn Grass” is a mother-daughter poem. “Childhood is a hot country Amma lives there”, says Meena. Changanacheri fair , the taste of “spiced pomfret”, “mangoes so ripe” and the table cloth of her dead mother are the unfading realities of her imaginary mind. The image of her grandfather who sexually abused her haunts her always. It shatters the rosewood frame of her childhood days: “Clouds swelled the mirror, broke its rosewood frame”. (Alexander, 2008. 10)

In “Kochi by the Sea” , the memory of burning Ahmedabad is recalled:

A quickly changing river
Parts of a city, many houses burning,
The sheaves of redemption reeling. (Alexander, 2008. 12)

Her memory always beckons her to her past days. Thus she speaks:

And underneath – in memory now –
I heard a darkness, luminous.
Kerala University, first class first. (Alexander, 2008. 12)

The poems “He Speaks: A Former Slave From Southern Sudan” and “She Speaks: A Seventy Four Year Old Woman to her Daughter” depict the sorrows and pains in the life of a slave. A slave is treated as a commodity. The punishment of the runaway slave brings tears to our eyes:

Hands were cut off, arms too,
as punishment for flight. Legs too.
(Alexander, 2008 . 55)

She loses her emotional roots in a foreign country. She suffers thus in “House of Breath”:

Now I am in a country that has no name. (Alexander, 2008 . 108)

She is passionate about her past in India and Sudan : “I am she come from where I crave again to be”. (Alexander, 2008. 21). The sense of “homelessness” is so vivid, so powerful, so permanent in her . Evan Boland complements Quickly Changing River that her poems are of rich and satisfying detail – ginkgo trees and water taxis, the pearly feathers of pilgrims. But the real strength of this book goes far beyond detail, however lyrically rendered. These poems are a sustained elegy for homelessness, for the displacement at the heart of human life...

She quests about her identity in “Fault Lines: A Memoir”.

I am a poet writing in America. But American poet? An Asian America poet then?... A woman poet; of colour, a South-Indian who makes up lines in English... A third world woman poet. (Fl 193)

The concept of home comes into vision through the lens of imagination in “The Cosmopolitan”:

This is where your home is led
Scales unsung and secret geography. (Alexander, 2008 ,4)

Jebel Marra, the mountainous region of Darfur, in the west of Sudan, Makram, Tesir, Prakash always live in her heart. She deplores of her present when she is in the foreign land: “Now my sorrow and my love smolder in a foreign language”. (Alexander, 2008.21).

In “Kochi By The Sea”, she wishes whole-heartedly:

A stream of blistered rocks where I must walk
Barefoot as I did so many years ago. (Alexander, 2008. 13).

Meena Alexander’s poetic journey to her homeland are really soul-stirring. Meena Alexander, a homebound pilgrim always finds peace, bliss and happiness in going down the memory lane of her early days.

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