

DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN THE POETRY OF MEENA ALEXANDER

A. Mariamma Angel

(Department of English, Tagore Govt. College of Education, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India)

ABSTRACT: Meena Alexander is a notable poet, critic and novelist. She is the South Asian American diasporic writer, wife of David Lelyveld, a South Asian historian. She was born in Allahabad, India on 17th February in 1951. At the age of about four or five her family had to leave Allahabad and Kerala for Sudan owing to her father's attachment as a scientist to the then Independent Indian Government. She belongs to a Syrian Christian family. Their family moved to Khartoum where she earned her early education at the Unity High School.

This paper attempts to analyze her diasporic experience depicted through her poetry. It focuses to emphasize the themes of alienation, identity crisis, immigration, ethnicity, cultural identity, diasporic consciousness, pain and violence of dislocation in her poetry. "Fragments of an inexistent whole", "Field in Summer", "Migrant Memory", "Morning Ritual" are the poems by Meena Alexander analyzed in this paper.

Keywords: diaspora, hyphenated identity, longing, nostalgic, split consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Meena Alexander explores migration, trauma, search for identity and reconciliation in her poetry. Her luminous and embodied poetic fountain flows down through her tongue in the form of creative art, she says "I am a poet writing in America, but American poet- An Asian American poet- a woman poet, a woman poet of color, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a Third World woman poet" (Fault Lines).

Analysis of her poem

In her poem, "Fragments of an inexistent whole", the persona deals with nostalgic memories and the sense of alienation. In the first stanza of the poem, "strange as any *me* I might claim /The already gone, its music barely audible", the persona describes the sense of longing for the things that doesn't belong to her anymore, which is fading away, simultaneously persona feels alienated and dislocated.

In the third stanza, "Men and women, faceless now, joyful and inconsolable / Veritable census of the dead", the persona expresses the feeling of being in a strange world, where the persona lives with an hyphenated identity. The ones who have immigrated to the foreign countries have lost their connectivity with their land while trying to assimilate into foreign culture. Due to their conflicting consciousness, they are struggling with hybrid identity because of the guilt one experiences while adapting new culture by crushing their own cultural identity. In the fourth stanza, "House of Dust / on open ground / lit by natural light / Is that where I belong?" the persona recalls her homeland and asks if it is where she belongs. Here the "house of dust" metaphorically refers to the house with ever cherished sweet memories filled with sadness and happiness all together; where the natural light brings joy in everyone's life with the prospect of a new beginning every day. In stanza 4, "Lord have mercy! / Grandmother cried, when I was born / This child will wander all her life", the persona describes the agony among the people when she was born, it subtly puts forth the irony that when a new baby is born in a family, usually people expresses ecstasy and immense pleasure, on the contrary, when she was born, everyone was worried about her identity, and thus her grandmother says that due to her hyphenated identity, she will be wandering throughout her life. This enumerates the predicament of immigrants in liminal space who doesn't hold the agency to participate in any cultural, political and social activities and are constantly scrutinized. It also establishes the patriarchal notion of demeaning the birth of a girl as a sign of bad omen which is the sole cause of the pain and humiliation that the women has to go through.

In the poem, "Field in Summer", Meena Alexander has dealt with the consequences of war and displays her longing for love. In this poem, the persona describes about the peaceful childhood spent with her parents where there was no war. Her life with her parents gave her the everlasting solace and peace that she could never forget. Nostalgic Meena Alexander's poetry sparkles with the loss of love and childhood. She begins her journey of life with her peaceful childhood and a simple life. But gradually she faces complexities in life. During her growth and development she encounters many facets of life that haunts her and these haunting experiences shape her poetic image: "I had a simple childhood, / A mother and father to take care of me, / no war at my doorstep. / Stones / sang canticles in my mouth / as darkness rose. / Love, love where are they gone? / Father, mother, in dark stars, / singing stones" (Field in

Summer). Happiness is just the one facet of the coin of life. The opposite one is the sorrow. The matured age with the burden of bitter experience recalls the happy childhood and wishes to live those days of thoughtless rapture again. It is her journey of self-expression and self-discovery. This poetry shows a glimpse of “Mnemotechnic”, it’s a word coined by a Greek poet, Simonides, referring to a “literary text produced out of, while actively producing, preserving and remembering personal, social and cultural pasts” .

For Meena Alexander, a home is of confinement with traditional boundary and traditional cultural practices and beliefs. Meena Alexander violates the traditional system and appears to be a distinguished diasporic writer. The poem “Migrant Memory” sketches the picture of nostalgic feelings and experiences of Alexander. Her journey of life makes an identity with native memory of cultural practices and foreign memory. She makes a fine blending of past and present in her poetic creations. So, the past facts and traditional cultures are the recurrent theme of her poetry: “I try to remember a desert town, / Mirages at noon, at dusk at dusty lawn / Bottles of gin and scotch, a mathematician / To whom I spoke of reading Poust all summer long. / His mistress stood on tiptoe wiping his brow with her pent up silk, / Her sari, hot green rivaling the neem leaves”(Migrant Memory).

Alexander discovers a difference between the views and opinions of a female and a male regarding an issue of living a life of a girl. In the voice of the female, there is the importance of wealth but in the voice of the male, it stresses on one’s own self-development: “Watching her, amma whispered in the wind- Be real. / Take a husband of good stock. As for love, it’s blind. / Appa’s voice low-No dowry. You’re all you need, / Your own precious self” (Migrant Memory). The persona is describing about the patriarchal norms that defies woman of their agency and confines them within the four walls. It depicts how the society is conditioned to stifle women from their birth itself and forces them to perform their gender.

Alexander’s grandmother makes a colony in the house of Alexander’s heart. Alexander writes back to the past and the most significant fact is that the past experiences and history greatly influence her poetic career. She is considered as the memory ruminator. She is in search of compensation for loss: “A life time ago grandmother Eli wore gold, / Stepped off a boat into a paddy field and vanished. / Where is grandmother now? / I need a golden ratio for loss.” (MigrantMemory). The land she belonged to is a land where she spent her childhood with many unforgettable experiences. This is displayed in her pictorial words: “Can Fibonacci’s theorem ease the hazard of memory? / Grandmother’s gold, sunk in time’s flood, /And in the dusty capital / Where I spent my early years, / A boy soldier bathed in his own blood” (Migrant Memory). It reflects the horrors of war, her estrangement from her native individuality due to cultural hegemony.

The morning is a very beautiful and joyous part of a day. So the morning shows the day how it will go on throughout. Man is born free and brings joy to the near and dear ones. But his journey of life is full of scares, difficulties, predicaments, joys and it is a life of unstable accounts of living. The struggling person is identified with Meena Alexander, who starts the day with diligence of study in order to make a home and an identity of staying at a home of culture and nature: “I sit in a patch of shade cast by a pipal tree. / Each morning I read a few lines from The Narrow Road to the Deep North” (Morning Ritual). In a state of rootlessness and dislocation and ambivalence, the persona tries to create her ethnic identity.

Sometimes life seems to her to be both pessimistic and optimistic though in the long run optimism overshadows pessimism. She has a horizontal hope for achievement. She as if considers herself as a learner- child who often without knowing grips something inedible and tries to have that into its mouth. Her innermost emotion comes out through her mighty words: “Everything is broken and numinous / Tiled roofs outcrops of stone, flesh, torn from molluks. /Far away, a flotilla of boats. A child sucking stones. / There is a forked path to this moment” (Morning Ritual).The persona is describing about her fractured consciousness where everything seems to be floating in-between, the torment, toils and tribulations one undergoes while fighting to assert their identity. The human body is dislocated but the soul along with indomitable will-power is not, rather it is mixed with its inventive and discovering urge: “Trees have no elsewhere. / Leaves very green” (Morning Ritual).

CONCLUSION

The poetry of Meena Alexander deals with the memory of her past experiences in her homeland and the foreign place. She describes her experience of being haunted by these memories. Her poetry is an epitome for all the diasporic poets who vent out their fractured consciousness through their poetry. Their poetry is an outlet to maintain their emotional stability that strengthens them to find an identity of their own amidst split consciousness.

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