

**Indian Poetry in English**  
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**Lecture - 21**  
**Meena Alexander**

Good morning and welcome back to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. All of you might remember that we are presently dealing with diasporic poetry by Indian poets who either because of their professional requirements or on some other reasons had to settle in different countries where they came across feelings of displacement, dislocation, alienation, uprootedness, loneliness and many more. All these actually together can be considered the essence of diasporic literature.

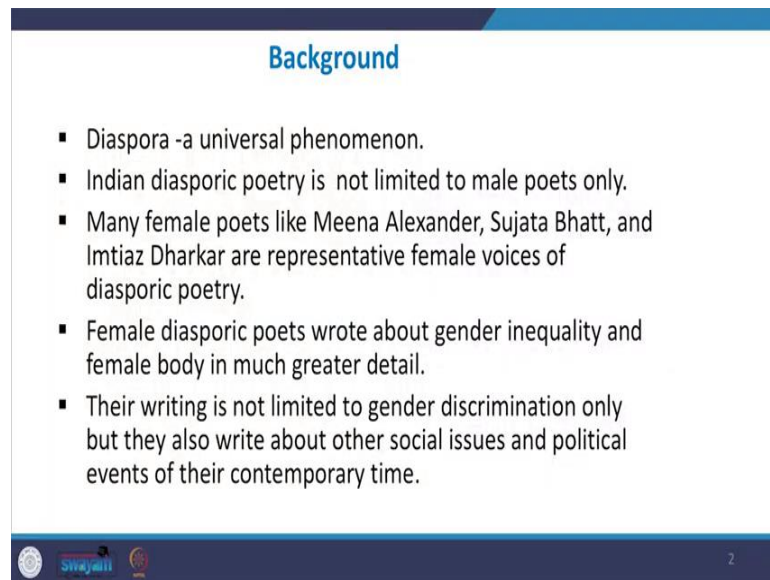
Since we are dealing with poetry and most of the poetry written actually oozes out of suffering. Here I am reminded of one very important line of a famous romantic poet named P. B. Shelley who says our sweetest songs are those that consist of our saddest thought.

And my dear friends, today we are going to discuss another significant celebrated Indian English poet namely Meena Alexander. A poet who actually shares her sympathies and bears resemblances with many such poets who had seen suffering in their life as a sort of inspiration which actually helped them come out of triumphantly.

So, while discussing Indian English diasporic poetry we have discussed A K Ramanujan and we also discussed Agha Shahid Ali. My dear friends even many women's voices also have got an important space in the world of diasporic poetry and Meena Alexander is one of them. So, in the lecture to follow, we shall be discussing who Meena Alexander was, what prompted her to write poetry and how she is also a very important diasporic poet.

Let us have a look at Meena Alexander's early life. You might all remember that in the beginning we had discussed one very important women poet named Kamala Das who was from Kerala. And the poet that we are going to discuss today, I mean, Meena Alexander, she also is from Kerala. Kerala was her first home.

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**Background**

- Diaspora -a universal phenomenon.
- Indian diasporic poetry is not limited to male poets only.
- Many female poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Imtiaz Dharker are representative female voices of diasporic poetry.
- Female diasporic poets wrote about gender inequality and female body in much greater detail.
- Their writing is not limited to gender discrimination only but they also write about other social issues and political events of their contemporary time.

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So, many female poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Imtiaz Dharker are representative female voices of diasporic poetry. Female diasporic poets, of course, they also touched upon the themes of dislocation and displacement. But then they being women poets also had one theme which was gendered in equality and female body which actually find medicine in greater detail.


Their writing is not limited only to gender discrimination because since they are women, majority of us may think that they might be writing feministic writing or feministic poems, but they also write about other social issues, namely dislocation and then disappointments, of course. Their being a woman of course, some way or the other they will be more concerned with the issues of the women, but they will not be oblivious to the contemporary reality.

Meena Alexander was actually born and she came from Kerala no doubt, but she was born in Allahabad. She was actually born in Allahabad since her father was a meteorologist and then she had to change from time to time her places because of the transfer of her father.

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### Characteristic Features of Diasporic Writing

- ✓ Focus on homeland, dislocation and displacement
- ✓ Nostalgia
- ✓ Mobility between multiple places
- ✓ Shifting identity
- ✓ Cultural hybridism
- ✓ Dislocated individual
- ✓ Female body
- ✓ Gender inequality





And then we can also find the element of all you know diasporic writings prevalent in Meena Alexander's work. So, namely a focus on homeland, dislocation, displacement, nostalgia, mobility between multiple places, identity being shifted from time to time, but then there is a sort of cultural hybridism and Meena Alexander finds at times herself as a dislocated individual like other diasporic poets and there is also a mention of gender inequality.

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### Meena Alexander (1951-2018)

- A prominent female voice of Indian Diaspora
- Born in Allahabad, India in 1951.
- B.A at Khartoum University(Sudan) and a Ph.D at Nottingham University.
- Married David Lalyveld, an American Historian
- She experienced multiple border crossings, resulting into complex relationship between her mother tongue, Malayalam and the colonial language
- 2009 Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature, conferred by the South Asian Literary Association.



Now, if we have to have a look at Meena Alexander's life, you know, Meena Alexander was actually born as Mary Elizabeth. So, being born in Kerala which is actually considered to be a matrilineal family. So, there she was named Mary Elizabeth later on she her name. She was born in the year 1965 she did her B.A at Khartoum University Sudan.

As I told you that because of the transfer of her father she had also to change her place. And so, she did a B.A at Khartoum University and then she also did a PhD; for PhD she had to go to Nottingham University.

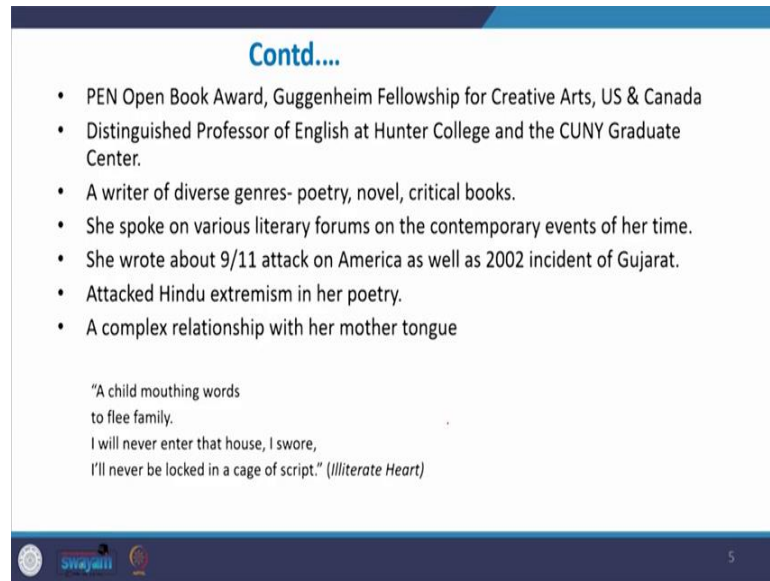
Actually, once upon a time she had come to Hyderabad CIFL where she had to stay for 2 years and then she came into contact with David Lelyveld who was an American historian and later on they married and this also paved Meena's way to go to U.S where she finally, settled. She experienced multiple transfers, border crossings which resulted into her relationship with a sort of alienation and dislocation with her own mother tongue that was actually Malayalam, fine?

Meena was a poet right from the beginning, but then various dislocations actually sped forth her writing and it actually prompted her to take up several issues. She also was awarded distinguished achievement award in literature in the year 2009 and this award was conferred upon her by South Asian Literary Association. Meena Alexander also got Pen Open Book Award and then she got a fellowship for creative arts in U.S and Canada. She was a distinguished professor at Hunter College and Cuny Graduate Center.

So, she also was in the field of teaching. She is actually a writer of diverse genres. She is not confined only to poetry, but she has also written novels. She has written many critical books some critical essays as well and she also got the opportunity of speaking on various occasions on various forums especially on contemporary events of her time. You will not only be surprised and delighted to know that she could not keep her pen stopped when certain things which actually disturbed her.

They actually also inspired her to write and at a times also speak of at times. She became very aggressive and she had her harsh words also on many occasions she attacked Hindu extremism in her poetry and there is a complex relationship with her mother tongue because she got dissociated from her mother tongue because of her settlement in the U.S.A.

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- PEN Open Book Award, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, US & Canada
- Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center.
- A writer of diverse genres- poetry, novel, critical books.
- She spoke on various literary forums on the contemporary events of her time.
- She wrote about 9/11 attack on America as well as 2002 incident of Gujarat.
- Attacked Hindu extremism in her poetry.
- A complex relationship with her mother tongue

"A child mouthing words  
to flee family.  
I will never enter that house, I swore,  
I'll never be locked in a cage of script." (*Illiterate Heart*)

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Now, one of the lines which actually get an echo about her alienation with her language that she says--- “A child mouthing words/ to flee family/ I will never enter the house, I swore,/ I will never be locked in a cage of a script.”

So, this actually shows the sort of disengagement that she experienced with her own language with her first language that is Malayalam. Now, let us also have a look at because Meena Alexander was actually a great writer and it is said that Meena Alexander was a very prominent female voice of diasporic Indian English poetry. So, her poetic sojourn begins with *The Bird's Bright Ring* which came out in 1976.

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### Poetry Collections



- *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976)
- *I Root My Name* (1977)
- *Stone Roots* (1981)
- *River and Bridge* (1986)
- *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988)
- *Illiterate Heart* (2002)

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Followed by *I Root My Name* in 1977, then *Stone Roots*, then *River and Bridge*, *House of a Thousand Doors*, *Illiterate Heart*. You can have a look at the titles and then you can imagine what sort of poems they are, might be because Meena was such a poet who would never allow things to go on in a way she wanted to rebel, but being a woman she has also shown the sort of helplessness and the sort of bindings that Indian women specially found.

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### Contd.

- *Raw Silk* (2004)
- *Quickly Changing River* (2008)
- *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013),
- *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018)
- *In Praise of Fragments* (2020)



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Then came in 2004 *Raw Silk*, then comes *Quickly Changing River*. Look at the title *Quickly Changing River*, then *Birthplace with Buried Stones*. I mean when we look at these titles we have an indication that most of her poems like other diasporic poets' also might be, you know, buried in memories and she wanted to unfold those memories and with the help of her own embroidery of words she then created *Atmospheric Embroidery* in the year 2018 which is actually full of the experiences of language, of the creation of poems.

Then, there are also some other poems which actually deal with the pains, the longings, the loneliness and then in 2020 came *In Praise of Fragments*. Meena Alexander actually breathed her last in the year 2018 fine. Meena Alexander, as I said, was not confined only to poetry she has also written two novels namely *Nampally Road* which has actually the setting of Indian city Hyderabad and in this book she had delineated the conflict between the protagonist's love for poetry and literature for the political reality of India in the 70s.

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**Meena Alexander's Novels**

- *Nampally Road* (1991)- Set in the Indian city, Hyderabad. Explores the conflict between the protagonist's love for poetry and literature and the political reality of India in 1970s.
- *Manhattan Music* (1996)- about an Indian immigrant girl and her struggled life in USA.


Then comes *Manhattan Music*-- that is also a novel which came out in 1996. It is also about an immigrant girl and her struggling life in U.S.A. Maybe one can find autobiographical tones or echoes in this. There are other literary works also which is one of her auto biographies.

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**Other Literary Works**



- *Fault Lines* (1993)- It's her memoir where she shares her traumatic experience of feeling molestation as a child by her own relative. She published its second edition with Nagugi wa Thing'o.
- *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1999)
- *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009)– about female identity.



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Namely *Fault Lines* is a memoir where she shares her own traumatic experiences right from the beginning, right from her childhood when she also gives some indication of her own abuse by some of the elder relatives and all. Then comes *The Shock of Arrival* which is a reflection on post colonial experience and then the *Poetics of Dislocation*.

I mean Meena's poetic oeuvre is too long and it is very difficult to take up all the poems, but for your benefit and for my understanding I think if we could take some of the poems you will be able to understand and measure the pulse of her poetry-- the echoes that actually kept her always agog and the sort of frustration and the split identities that Meena Alexander actually experienced from time to time. Now, what actually are the characteristics of her poem or the salient features of her poems.



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The slide is titled "Themes and Characteristics of Her Poem" in blue text. It features a list of ten items, each preceded by a blue square icon. To the right of the list is a blue oval containing a quote in white text. At the bottom left of the slide are three small logos, and at the bottom right is the number "10".

- ❑ Dislocation
- ❑ Immigration and migration
- ❑ Fracture between past and present
- ❑ Theme of language, writing and diaspora
- ❑ Exile and eviction
- ❑ The female body
- ❑ Indian social and political scenario in background
- ❑ The communal division propagated by colonialism (*Asthamundi Lake*)
- ❑ Explored lyric poetry as genre
- ❑ Personal tone

"I have always grown up in a world where there were things one did not understand, because there were languages that were not completely accessible ... I think this is a very good hedge against a certain kind of rational understanding, the presumption of linguistic clarity or transparency, post-Enlightenment, that sense that everything can be known and a light can be shone into all parts of one's thought."

(Alexander to Ruth Maxey of the Kenyon Review)

Of course, dislocation and displacement being one of them. She actually was an immigrant and that is why migration takes in majority of poems as its subject matter, then there is a fracture between past and present, of course. Body, as I said, being a woman naturally body also should get some space and then she explored lyric poetry.

Whenever she writes you can find the words are so simple, but the words are so subtle my dear friend because she actually tries to load her words in such a manner that they could actually unplug the ocean not only of frustration, but also of despair.

Meena Alexander in one of her interviews to a Kenyon review-- what she says is very significant and I would like to share with you what she says; she says, "I have always grown up in a world where there were things one did not understand." Look at the words. Where there were things one did not understand because there were languages that were not completely accessible. The loss of language and you know while crossing over borders she felt that she was losing one language, but in a way the loss of one language is also the gain for the other.

"I think it is a very good hedge against a certain kind of rational understanding-- the presumption of linguistic clarity or transparency post enlightenment that sense that everything can be known and a light can be shown into all parts of one's thought." So, there is actually gain in a loss you lose one language, but you actually gain another

language. So, this conflict between the loss and the gain is a perennial theme of Meena Alexander's work.

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**House of a Thousand Doors**

This house has a thousand doors  
the sills are cut in bronze  
three feet high  
to keep out snakes,  
toads, water rats  
that shimmer in the bald reeds  
at twilight  
as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast.

The roof is tiled in red  
pitched with a silver lightning rod  
a prow, set out from land's end  
bound nowhere.  
In dreams  
waves lilt, a silken fan  
in grandmother's hands  
shell colored, utterly bare as the light takes her.

POETS & PROSE PIECES OF MEENA ALEXANDER  
**HOUSE OF A THOUSAND DOORS**  
AN ORIGINAL FROM THREE CONTINENTS PRESS

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I can take a poem from one of her collections entitled *House of a Thousand Doors* which is actually related to her past, but at the same time it is related to many of her associations with her family members. And there in the background lies the grandmother. So, the grandmother is very symbolical and by bringing the grandmother she actually talks of the entire community of women where she actually tries to say how women were suppressed even in a matrilineal society like Kerala, but then she has India on her mind.

And what she says not only is very painful, but what she says is also a sort of light that people could see even in the dark corners. “This house has a thousand doors/ the sills are cut in bronze/ three feet high/ to keep out snakes”. While there is a pretext that the walls are high to keep out snakes. But when even then there are walls are you really protected behind the walls that is the question.


“Toads, water rats/ that shimmer in the bald reeds/ at twilight/ as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast/ the roof is tiled in red.” you will find that Meena Alexander actually makes use of several images, several colors. So, when she talks of red she is actually referring to blood, when she talks of blood she is referring to violence, when she talks of walls she is talking of security, when she talks of umbrellas she is talking of protection.

So, you can find ample number of such allusions which are prevalent in the work after work of Meena Alexander. “The roof is tiled in red,/ pitched with a silver lightning rod /a prow set out from the land’s end/ bound nowhere/ in dreams/ waves lilt a silken fan/ in grandmothers hands/ shell colored utterly bear as the light takes her as the light takes her.”

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She kneels at each  
of the thousand doors in turn  
paying her dues.  
Her debt is endless.  
I hear the flute played in darkness,  
a bride’s music.  
A poor forked thing  
I watch her kneel in all my lifetime  
imploring the household gods  
who will not let her in.



POETRY & PROSE POEMS OF MEENA ALEXANDER  
**HOUSE OF A THOUSAND DOORS**  
AN ORIGINAL FROM THREE CONTINENTS PRESS

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Grandmother is the protector, grandmother is the savior but then can all the women be saved. All the women are actually having a sort of choice of freedom, I think in the lines that come: “She kneels at each/ of the thousand doors in turn/ paying her dues/ Her debt is endless.” Mark these lines her debt is endless.

But then we always think of a patriarchal society where the contributions of women are not given due weightage. I hear the flute played in darkness, fine? You see the freedom subscribed--- “/I hear the flute played in darkness/ a bride’s music/ a poor forked thing./ I watch her kneel in all my lifetime/ imploring the household gods.” See. “Imploring the household gods/ who will not let her in.” I mean you can find here the sort of indication that Meena shows.

The household gods actually may stand for tradition, the household gods may stand for the people the elder of the house, but then the question is who will not let her in. So, the grandmother’s job is only to kneel at each of the thousand doors in turn, paying her dues.

So, Meena actually does it in a very architectonic way by utilizing the words wherever she wants and trying to convey the meaning that she actually wants to convey.

So, a thousand you know the poem has been rightly titled as *This House has a Thousand Doors*. So, there are a thousand doors, but are these thousand doors really open or all these thousand doors-- there is actually a protector, but how protector is the protector himself or herself that is a question my dear friend.

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**On Female Body**

❑ Alexander critiques Gandhi for repressing female sexuality in India's freedom struggle. Although Gandhi advocated women's participation but their sexuality was totally denied. She says, "Women were freed for political action but the female body had to bear the pitiful burden of repressed desire and the pain of withdrawn sexuality."

"I am she  
The woman after giving birth  
life  
to give life  
torn and hovering  
as bloodied fluids  
baste the weakened flesh." (Passion)

Dear Mr. Gandhi  
please say something  
about the carnage in your home state.  
How did you feel when they shut  
the gates of Sabarmati ashram  
that February night  
and the wounded clung outside?  
What has happened to ahimsa?  
Is it just for the birds and the bees?  
("Slow Dancing")

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Now, as I have been saying that Meena Alexander had her eyes on all sorts because she had had multiple crossovers from one country to another. But then female body was very important to her as being a woman and then she could not keep herself quiet when she found that even though there was a call for a woman to join the national movement when there was actually the era of Gandhi and the Gandhi movement was there.

But were the women really free? That is actually a question and Meena Alexander actually puts this question even to Gandhi and she critiques Gandhi for repressing female sexuality in India's freedom struggle.

Though Gandhi had been an advocate of women's rights, but their sexuality was totally denied she says women were freed for political action, but the female body had to bear the pitiful burden of a repressed desire and the plan of withdrawn sexuality. They had actually to get their hair cut if they really wanted to join the Gandhi movement.

And you know in one of the poems entitled “Passion”, what she says; “I am she/ the woman after giving birth/ life/ to give life/ torn and hovering/ as bloodied fluids/ baste the weakened flesh.”

So, their sexuality was totally denied and you know in one of the poems entitled “Slow Dancing”, See the title of the poem is slow dancing where she says where she actually in a very open way this actually comes from a series of letters to Gandhi. There is actually a series of letters to Gandhi and one such poem is: “Dear Mr. Gandh/i please say something about the carnage in your home state.”

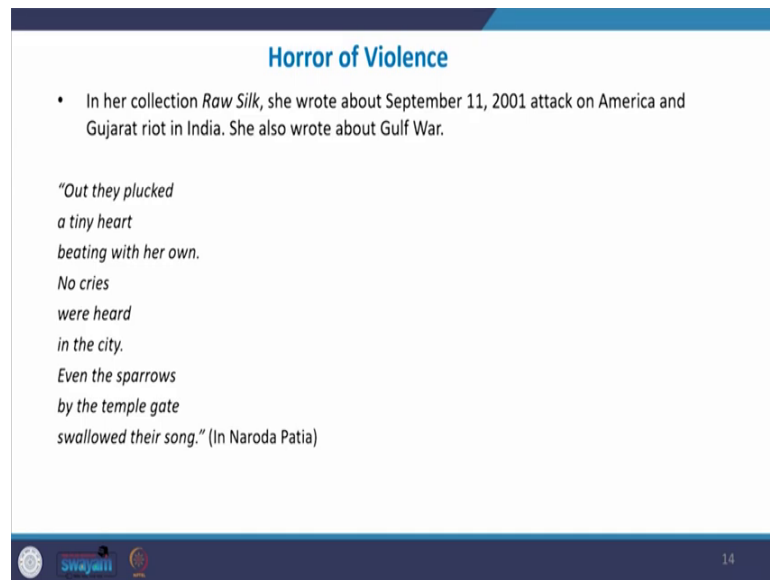
Whenever when there was a riot in the home state of Gandhi that is Gujarat at that time she had written it--- Dear Mr. Gandhi/ please say something about the carnage in your home state/ how did you feel? When they shut/ the gates off Sabarmati Ashram/ that February night/ and the wounded and the wounded clung outside /what has happened to ahimsa.”

So, she questions the word *ahimsa* that you who are a profounder of ahimsa how could you see this, what has happened to ahimsa, is it just for the birds and the bees is it not for the human beings?

So, she asks a question and this question actually is not only to Gandhi, but to actually a world which talks about non -violence, which talks about ahimsa which talks about peace, prosperity and what not. So, in a way even when she talked about women’s body she also had her eyes open for the other atrocities that were committed around her in her own surroundings. She has also written some poems which actually are centered around the gulf war and in one of her collections entitled Raw Silk.

She writes about this September 11, 2001, you all remembered that there was an attack on America and she actually on that attack she had written.

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**Horror of Violence**

- In her collection *Raw Silk*, she wrote about September 11, 2001 attack on America and Gujarat riot in India. She also wrote about Gulf War.

*"Out they plucked  
a tiny heart  
beating with her own.  
No cries  
were heard  
in the city.  
Even the sparrows  
by the temple gate  
swallowed their song." (In Naroda Patia)*

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And again this poem we can take which actually talks about the sort of atrocities ---Out they plucked/ a tiny heart/ beating with her own/ no cries/ were heard/ in the city,/ even the sparrows/ by the temple gate/ swallowed their song.” So, this is a poem from *In Naroda Patia*, this is actually the place where this incident had taken place and she says ‘out they plucked/ a tiny heart/’ I mean, they could not leave even the new generation.

A tiny heart beating with her own no cries were heard in the city even the sparrows by the temple gate swallowed their song.

So, she is actually open to and as a poet she feels that these sufferings can never be condoned. These atrocities can never be condoned and what a civilized society is doing when we are simply sloganeering and we are giving all sorts of slogans, but then have we really been able to neutralize the sort of violence that is there. I mean in another poem entitled “ Raw Meditations on Money”. one she speaks a school teacher from South India.

Here in this poem also you will find she in some way or the other talks about the plight of women and the question of how the dowry which has become very important for Indians when they get their daughters married they have to pay the dowry and how she questions this tradition and she also shows, she actually wants to make people aware of what is being done.

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**from Raw Meditations on Money, 1. She Speaks: A School Teacher from South India**

Portions of a mango tree the storm cut down,  
a green blaze bent into mud  
and they come to me, at dawn

three girls from Kanpur, far to the north admittedly  
(we know this from national geography class,  
the borders of states, the major cities).

They hung themselves from fans.  
In the hot air they hung themselves  
so that their father would not be forced to tender gold

he did not have, would not be forced  
to work his fists to bone.  
So that is how a portion of the story goes.

Slowly in the hot air they swung, three girls.  
How old were they?  
Of marriageable age certainly.

Sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, something of that sort.  
How do I feel about it?  
What a question! I am one of three sisters,

most certainly I do not want father to proffer money,  
he does not have for my marriage.  
Get a scooter, a refrigerator, a horde of utensils,

swajati Sri Aurobindo Society 15

And then she says in this poem—“Portions of mango tree the storm cut down/ a green blaze bent into mud/ and they come to me at dawn./ Three girls from Kanpur, far to north admittedly/ we know this from national geography class/ the borders of states the major cities/ they hung themselves from fans/ in the hot air they hung themselves./ So, that their father would not be forced to tender gold?”. Now here comes the major question that the fathers could not afford to give gold in order to marry their daughters, fine. And that is why ‘he did not have, would not be forced/ to work his fists to bone./ So, that is how a portion of the story goes/ slowly in the hot air they swung three girls/ how old were they/ of marriageable age certainly.’”

So, here the question of marriage and the question of the daughters’ fathers also actually creates a sort of pictures in the minds of or should create a sort of picture in the minds of civilized people.

“Sixteen, seventeen and eighteen something of that sort/ how do I feel about it/ what a question I am one of the three sisters?”. And then she actually says--- I also may be one of them and the poverty stricken fathers who are not able to marry off their daughters because of the question of dowry.

“Most certainly I do not want my father to proffer money,’. We also can see here a sort of conviction, ‘he does not have for my marriage/ get a scooter fridge or refrigerator or horde of utensils.’”

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| <p>silks, and tiny glittering bits of gold<br/><u>to hang about my ears and throat. breathe into the strokes of catastrophe,</u><br/>and let the school bus wait.<br/>You will get to it soon enough and the small, hot faces.</p> <p>See how the monsoon winds soar and shunt<br/>tropic air into a house of souls,<br/><u>a doorway stopped by clouds.</u><br/><u>Gold is labor time accumulated . . . labor time defined.</u></p> <p>Who said that? Yes, I am a schoolteacher, fifth standard<br/>trained in Indian history and geography,<br/>Kerala University, first class first.</p> <p>The storm tree puts out its limbs and<br/>I see three girls swinging. One of them is me.<br/>Step back I tell myself.</p> | <p>Saumiya, step back. <del>The whole history</del><br/>of womankind is compacted here.<br/><u>Open your umbrella, tuck your sari tight,</u><br/><u>breathe into the strokes of catastrophe,</u><br/><u>and let the school bus wait.</u><br/><u>You will get to it soon enough and the small, hot faces.</u></p> <p>See how the monsoon winds soar and shunt<br/>tropic air into a house of souls,<br/>a doorway stopped by clouds.</p> <p>Set your feet into broken stones<br/>and this red earth and pouring rain.<br/>For us there is no exile.</p> <p><u>(Quickly Changing River, 2008)</u></p> |
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So, all these things my father or the fathers of daughters cannot give. So, why do these daughters not stand and why do they not oppose ‘silks and tiny glittering bits of gold/ to hang about my ears and throat’. ostentations fine. And ‘let the school bus wait/ you will get it too soon enough and the small hot faces.’

“See how the monsoon winds soar and shunt/ tropic air into a house of souls/ a doorway stopped by clouds/ Gold is labor time accumulated... labor time defined.” And as the poem moves we can find—“The storm tree puts out its limbs and/ I see three girls swinging. One of them is me./ Set back step back I tell myself.” So, we should all have freedom just like the boys, but we do not have, says the woman and then she says that they could have enjoyed swinging going up in a swing and I find myself my childhood, but then I need to step back I need to withdraw.

Why? “Saumiya, step back the whole history/ of womankind is compacted here/ open your umbrella tuck your sari tight /open your umbrella.” Why do you always want to be protected? Why do not you come out of it tuck your sari tight ‘breathe into the strokes of catastrophe/ and let the school bus wait/ you will get to it soon enough and the small hot faces/ see how the monsoon winds soar and shunt/ tropic air into a house of souls./A doorway stopped by clouds/”. And the last stanza and this poem has been taken from *Quickly Changing River*, fine. So, the last stanza is very significant- “Set your feet into broken stones/ and this red earth and pouring rain/ for us there is no exile.” For us there



is no exile. Now, why do you always think that I have to stop I have to terminate my life. Why do you think of exile, banishment? Set your feet into broken stones for this red earth and pouring rain for us there is no exile.

So, there are end number of such poems by Meena Alexander where you can find that she not only portrays the painful reality, but then she also tries to caution people and she also wants to make people aware.

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The slide is titled "Atmospheric Embroidery" in a blue font. It contains a poem by Meena Alexander. To the right of the poem is a book cover for "Atmospheric Embroidery" by Meena Alexander, which features abstract, colorful illustrations. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for Swayam and a page number 17.

**"Atmospheric Embroidery"**

Wads of ice-cream glisten on Route 6.  
We stroll into summer, thoughts thrust into a bramble

Oriental bitter-sweet pocking the hedges,  
Fists in pockets, lemonade dripping from a child's hem.

In Boetti's embroidery, in his mapping of the world  
Everything is cut and coupled,

Occult ordering – silk and painted steel  
Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked man.

In The Thousand Longest Rivers  
The Nile is the hardest water

Atmospheric Embroidery  
Meena Alexander

There is another collection named *Atmospheric Embroidery* and you know Meena Alexander was influenced not only by romantic poets, but many of the American poets namely Audre Lorde, Tony Harrison and then Ngugi Wa Thiongo because, you know, she had also been experimenting with language one after another.

And then there is another poem named *Atmospheric Embroidery* where you know she says--- Wads of ice cream glisten on route six/ we stroll into summer thoughts thrust into a bramble/ oriental bitter sweet pocking the hedges/ fists in pockets lemonade dripping from a child's hem. /In Boettis embroidery." Boetti was actually a famous embroiderer and you know he was an artist and he had shown the entire world through embroidery

"In his mapping of the world/ everything is cut and coupled/ occult ordering---- silk and painted steel/ sun and electric moon butterfly and naked man/ In The Ten Thousand Longest Rivers/ The Nile is the hardest water".And then she says.

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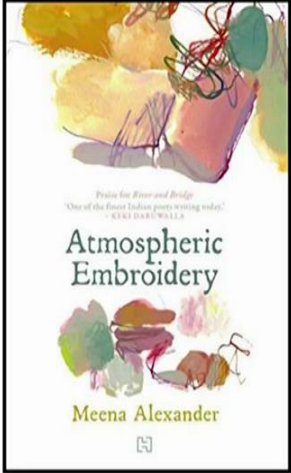
Then comes the Mississippi – Missouri.  
Once we lived by brilliant waters

Suffered the trees' soft babble,  
Fissures in magma.

Already its August –  
Season of snipers in the heartland,

Season of coastlines slit by lightning  
And smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose.

Now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever  
To put one foot in front of the other and keep on  
walking.



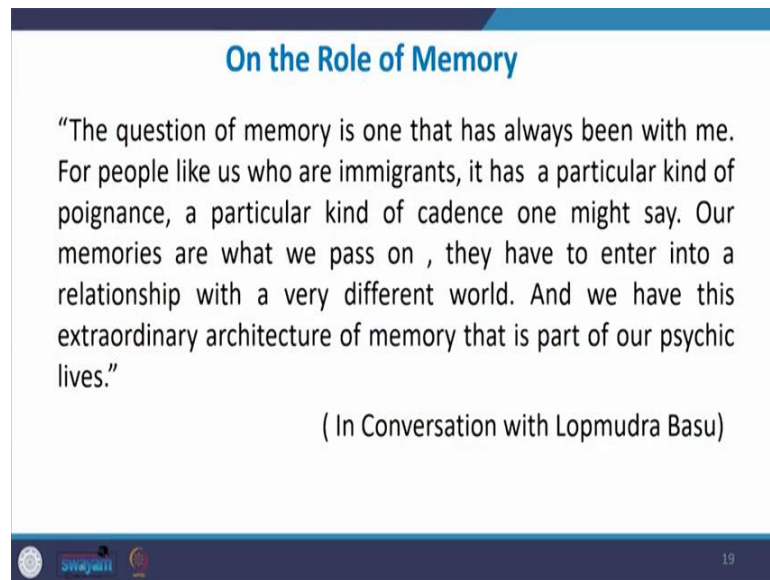
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“Then comes the Mississippi Missouri/ once we lived by brilliant waters”. Again, memory. “Once we lived by brilliant waters/ suffered the trees soft babble/ fissures in magma fissures in magma.”

You know, we also have seen fissures in molten rocks and, “Already it is August/ season of snipers in the heartland/ season of coast lines slit by the lightning/ and smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose.” and look at let us look at the last line.

“Now, I think it is a miracle we were able ever/ to put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking/. Were we did we ever have such a freedom that we could put in put one of our feet in front of the other and keep on walking, but then that we have to do it and that is how she actually prepares, she actually inspires her own lot specially the women folk to come out of all this. I mean we have seen that Meena’s poetic world is steeped in memory like all other diasporic poets.

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**On the Role of Memory**

“The question of memory is one that has always been with me. For people like us who are immigrants, it has a particular kind of poignance, a particular kind of cadence one might say. Our memories are what we pass on, they have to enter into a relationship with a very different world. And we have this extraordinary architecture of memory that is part of our psychic lives.”

( In Conversation with Lopmudra Basu)

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But when she talks about the role of memory in her poem in one of the conversations with a Lopmudra Basu what she says is really an eye opener and can give you know volumes of thoughts.

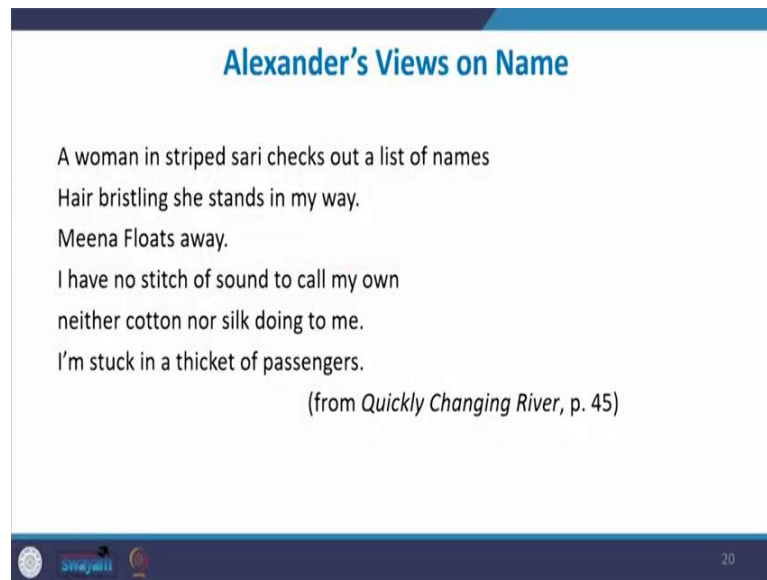
“The question of memory is one that has always been with me for people like us who are immigrants you know migration is a major part of her poetry. It is a particular kind of poignance a particular kind of cadence one might say our memories are what we pass on. They have to enter into our relationship with a very different world and we have this extraordinary architecture of memory that is part of our psychic lives.”

So, we cannot say a good bye to a memory, which is steeped, it is ingrained and we have to make it a sort of inspiration and we have to go back and to live the life that we have lost because I have been saying that there is actually a gain in a loss and the past can never be shed and the past can never a be given an adieu, my dear friend.

Alexander, especially she actually struggled on different fronts, but what was so important was the question of identity, the question of name. And as she herself had said that her name has different meanings, you know, her name has different meanings.

And how the name Meena which has some meaning in Hindi, some meaning in Arabic and she says in one of the poems once again from *Quickly Changing River*.

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Alexander's Views on Name

A woman in striped sari checks out a list of names  
Hair bristling she stands in my way.  
Meena Floats away.  
I have no stitch of sound to call my own  
neither cotton nor silk doing to me.  
I'm stuck in a thicket of passengers.

(from *Quickly Changing River*, p. 45)

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What she says is--- “A woman in striped sari checks out a list of names. / Hair bristling she stands in my way / Meena floats away/ I have no stitch of sound to call my own./ See I have no stitch of sound to call my own ‘neither cotton nor silk doing to me/. I am stuck in a thicket of passengers.”

Do I have the choice to choose even my name? Do I actually have the freedom to choose my own identity and you know, my dear friend what Meena says may be true of women, but this is also true of all of us because do we really if we think of it philosophically, do we really have a choice of our own, can we really cater to as human beings to the choices of all of our own.

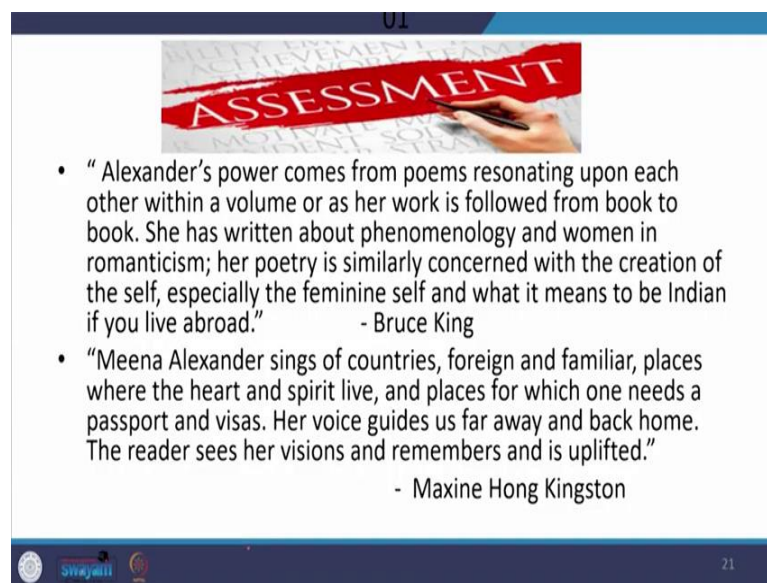
But especially in the cases of a woman of course, they do not have a choice of their own and that is what actually it results in a sort of pain, in a sort of loneliness, in a sort of dislocation, in a sort of dejection, in a sort of disappointment, in a sort of deprivation.

So, if we have a look at Meena Alexander's world we can see that Meena's world is full of pain, but out of the pain she has created a sort of pleasure. She has actually discovered language like anything, her world is full of agonies, but even in agonies we can find the way she makes use of literary devices say anaphora, fine metaphors, repetition of words, phrases, allusions. Her literary soil, her poetic soil is very alluvial says one of the poets. We can also have a look at some of the comments that some of the contemporary writers and critics have loaded on her.

So, Bruce King says—“Alexander’s power comes from poems resonating upon each other within a volume of her work which is followed from book to book. She has written about phenomenology and women in romanticism;’ Because she was very much influenced by romantic poets. ‘Her poetry is similarly concerned with the creation of the self every now and then there is a struggle for the self.”

Especially the feminine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad, but then even when Meena lived abroad she actually had created a niche of her own.

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**ASSESSMENT**

- “ Alexander’s power comes from poems resonating upon each other within a volume or as her work is followed from book to book. She has written about phenomenology and women in romanticism; her poetry is similarly concerned with the creation of the self, especially the feminine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad.” - Bruce King
- “Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted.” - Maxine Hong Kingston

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Not only does Meena sing of countries, not only of her own foreign and familiar, places where the heart and the spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home and the reader sees her visions and remembers and of course, is uplifted.

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**Where Do You Come From?**

I come from the nether regions  
They serve me pomegranate seeds with morsels of flying fish  
From time to time I wear a crown of blood streaked grass.

Mama beat me when I was a child for stealing honey from a honey pot  
It swung from the rafters of the kitchen.  
Why I stuffed my mouth with golden stuff, no one could tell.

King Midas wore a skin that killed him.  
My nails are patterned ebony, Doxil will do that  
They made a port under my collar bone with a plastic tube that runs into  
a blood vessel.

I set out with mama from Bombay harbor.  
Our steamer was SS Jehangir, in honor of the World Conqueror —  
They say he knelt on the battle field to stroke the Beloved's shadow.

The waves were dark in Bombay harbor, Gandhi wrote in his  
Autobiography  
Writing too is an experiment with truth.  
No one knows my name in Arabic means port.

On board white people would not come near us  
Were they scared our brown skin would sully them?  
Mama tried to teach me English in a sing song voice.

So you can swim into your life she said.  
Wee child, my language tutor muttered ruler in hand, ready to strike,

Just pronounce the words right:

Pluck, pluck      Suck, suck

Duck, duck

Stuck, stuck.

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So, having had a look at Meena's works, let us now come to wind up this talk, but then it would be an injustice if we once again do not take some of the lines of a poem entitled "Where Do You Come From?" Where now that itself gives a sort of identity and again she moves back she retreats to past and then she says--- "On board white people would not come near us/ Were they scared of a brown skin would sully them/ Mama tries to teach me English in a singsong voice."

Language English that I learnt in a sing song manner and my teachers always used to tell me the right pronunciation, but even then when I have come to this land and I can find myself on board where the white people would not come near us, is not it?

So, all these actually help us understand and derive the pleasure that even though the poet is steeped in past, but then she interrogates she actually raises many questions and see actually success with arrival at times you can also find that even though she interrogates a system she actually wants an answer to the questions that are hovering in her mind of her own.

So, with this we come to the end of it and let us say where do you come from, that is actually universal question and as she rightly says all of us can also think like "I come from the nether regions/ they serve me with pomegranate seeds with morsels of flying fish/ from time to time I wear a crown of blood streaked grass." We are very close to grass because grass is the reality, grass is the earth and grass is always beautiful. Thank

you very much for a patient listening and the next lecture we shall take up some other diasporic poet.

Thank you.