Question of Gendered Identity and Indian Diaspora in Meena Alexander’s Nampally Road

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Abstract
In this paper an attempt has been made to explore and understand Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road* (1992), one of those Indian Diasporas who have attained excellence in the literature of the postcolonial era. It pertains to the study of women narratives in the Indian context. The question of gendered identity and the issues like what does it mean to be a female postcolonial subject and a writer, surface in her novel. The migrant women’s search is thus understood in the light of these complex forms of signification. In addition, cultural, racial, linguistic, and other factors too emerge as cardinal determinants of Alexander’s identity. Thus the plurality within an Indian woman gets highlighted through multicultural flavour of the text. *Nampally Road* vividly pictures the contemporary India and a woman’s struggle to bring together her broken past. Through the character Rameeza bi in *Nampally Road*, Alexander portrays the deprived condition of the Indian women. On the contrary Durga Bai is depicted as strong contemporary Indian women.

**Keywords:** Gender, Postcolonial, Identity, Feminism, Diaspora

Meena Alexander is one of those Indian diasporas who have attained excellence in the literature of postcolonial era. She originally belonged to an ex-colony, and has captured an important place in the American University. Alexander’s works are deeply engaged with political questions. Along with grappling with issues of the mixed legacies of colonialism, language, violence, and trauma, many of these questions intersect with the question of gendered identity in postcolonial societies. Feminism for Alexander is not an inevitable inheritance of her own western education. Unlike her relationship with the English language and particularly Romantic poetry, feminism is not something she enters into from a metropolitan location and intellectual frame work. Instead she attempts to trace a deliberately indigenous genealogy of a third-world and specifically Indian feminism. Alexander tries to trace an Indian feminist tradition within which to locate and locate her owned involvement with women’s issues.

Alexander’s *Nampally Road*, a socio-political novel, is a portrayal of India after two decades of Indian Independence. The socio-political fiction in Indian English literature deals with various social and political issues.
which takes-up evolutions in these spheres in Indian society. Creative writing interlinks political and social issues together as it is tough to different between them. In reality, every social issue gets a political scope, denoting towards a comprehensive political upheaval. Alexander is awfully critical when she views institutions moving away from ethics and values. In *Nampally Road*, she has represented the devaluation in the political and personal spheres of life. In this novel, she portrays the political activity of the nation in the direct post-independence period.

The novel is hinged on a few preferred incidents, which occurred in Hyderabad and, particularly, on a road named Nampally Road.

Mira, a college teacher, is the narrator of the story. She is accompanied by a college-teacher, Ramu. They both teach English in Sona Nivas, a local college. He is so totally desi that he leaves of all the chances of going abroad, which is odd regarding that majority of the people in India have always been insane about going abroad during and after the colonial era: “...he turned down the Rhodes Scholarship that others might have killed for, accepted a modest grant from Jawaharlal Nehru University and swore on the memory of his dead mother never to leave the boundaries of free India...” (3). He is extremely unconventional and refuses superstitions containing what he cites as “horoscope rubbish.” Ramu is an effective participant in all the protests. Once he pushed in creating the experimental newspaper that students set by hand. For this, he is confined and held in custody many times. He always wants to take a difference, to do something for India, whatever that something might-be. The principal incident in the novel is the birthday celebration of the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Limca Gowda. In Alexander’s words:

> Limca Gowda was an ambitions man and wished to turn himself into an absolute ruler ... The notion of unquestioned power vested in a single man ... His party which had been voted in four years ago, now ruled with an iron hand. Dissent was strongly discouraged. (4-5)

Gowda infers as an almost Hitler-like character and subdues the marginalized. Nampally Road, which is deservedly calm road, becomes a blaring roadway due to the birthday celebrations of the Chief Minister. The tax-money of the people is spent like water:

> Fully authorized by his own ruling party, Limca Gowda had decided to turn his dreams to good use. His office was now run from the old fort of Golconda, the seat of the rulers of ancient Hyderabad. It was rumoured that for his birthday celebrations fast approaching now, he would take hold of history with an iron hand, mix and match as he desired/dress up as the last Qutubshahi, and mimic the mad gestures of the dead Nizam. (38)
Meanwhile, Rameeza, a young woman, is raped in police custody. She is followed by her husband to Sagar Talkies to watch the celebrated Isak Katha. On their returning back home, they are surrounded by a gang of drunken policemen. She is gang-raped and her husband has beaten out. But no one can provoke his voice for any issue, till Limca Gowda’s sixtieth birthday celebrations are concluded, even if a woman is raped in police custody. The raped woman has no voice. Her pain has a language but who listens? When Rameeza, the rape-victim is interviewed by Mira, that entire she can do is make little whispers and short outcries. Mira and Ramu want to realise their agony and pain. They disclose her that those who raped her will be brought to justice and that people would raise-up against violence. In the novel, a woman is raped in police custody and two other women are raped and buried in the sands of the Arabian Sea. In spite of forceful recommendations by the Indian Law Commission, various judgments in Courts and laws against rape, the police do not take any action, as they appear to be more bothered about the birthday celebration than about the catastrophic fate of a destitute woman.

The novel, Nampally Road, has another significant character, Dr. Durgabai, Little Mother. The author appears to signify that India requires the healing-touch of doctors like Durgabai. The Little Mother, possibly, is an allegory of Mother India. The allegory is made apparent when Durgabai endures illness when the metropolis undergoes agitation and brutalities carry out in the name of politics. Durgabai also manifests high interest in all the occurrences of the novel and endures psychological upheaval as she endures differently with the agonies of the suppressed. The development has become impasse due to illiteracy and poverty. In the novel, a tribal-man comes to Dr. Durgabai’s hospital with a child of ten-years-old, part of whose skull is torn and the whitish brain issue is transparent. The boy is mangled by a leopard. The man, being an illiterate, does not even know the criticalness of the issue and loses his son. Durgabai becomes horrible, tortured by the rich-men’s absurd show and the refined lifestyle of present-day doctors which can be backed only with the aid of black money. Her consideration is totally devoted to a most-expected change of India. “A new India is being born,” she asserts naturally, she has a soft-corner for women in trouble.

As equipped with the impact of good educational upbringing, both Mira and Ramu, typical citizens in the novel, are in a position to serve the country. There is a barber-shop at the right-side of the house of Little Mother and a bicycle-shop at the left-side. The small boys, apprentices, sleep on the blacktop using rugs. Little Mother enjoys in treating their small illness. She criticizes them: “They were all picked off the street. He’s a good man the bicycle fellow. He treats them as well as he can. But they eat so poorly: ‘A bit of rice or roti and some dal if they’re lucky. I have dreams of keeping a buffalo to provide them with milk, what do you think?’” (9). Not only
has the Mother, but even an uneducated cycle-shop owner had something productive to bid toward the building-up of the economy of country. Alexander accentuates the position that it is every individual, poor or rich, who makes up the country, must infer the accountability to mould India into one of the eminent countries of the world. Little Mother feels distressed and almost angry she can sit and read the Wye-Valley poetry, but she triggers the question: “Why study Wordsworth in our new India” (54).

Poetic responsiveness, fine-arts, culture and religion, become affluences that well-fed plutocrats only can offer. The novel is a novel of anger and protest. At first, disagreement is recorded through mild upheavals. The novel attempts to substantiate that the rage of the gentle and the polite could rise to the level of mass revolution, which will finally annihilate the executioners of infringement and injustice. The pomp and show accompanying the sixtieth birthday celebration of the Chief Minister’s absolute ignorance of people, and the predicament of the millions who are chided to live a impoverished life in slums, all these culminate in the outbreak of lava in which Limca Gowda’s “Cardboard” city meets a fiery finale. What began as a mild protest in the form of orange sellers’ march wells up anger and determination against manifest injustice in the heart of millions and explodes leading on to such a violent end.

In every colonial nation, human relationships have arisen from the severest exploitation, founded on inequality and contempt and guaranteed by police authoritarianism. All administrative and political machinery is geared to a regime of oppression for the benefit of a few. For the colonizer, the most important area of domination is the mental domain of the colonized. The native woman is doubly marginalized by virtue of her relative economic oppression and gender subordination.

In all spheres of Indian society, women are dominated, dehumanized, and de-womanized, discriminated against, exploited, harassed sexually, used, abused and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male supremacy. Indian women still live under the shadow of patriarchal tradition that manifests itself in violence against women.

To quote an example from the novel, Alexander beautifully narrates a small pathetic incident wherein an old cobbler woman, who is in no way linked to the birth day celebrations of Gowda, is threatened by an Ever Ready man. The poor old woman is concentrating sincerely in mending the broken chapel of Mira. She is not only old and poor but suffers from leukoderma. The cobbler woman carefully works on the chapel without minding the slogans and the busy trucks carrying the cheering villagers, cheering for a promise of three free meals and a handful of rupees. But nothing seems to bother the woman who chooses a pavement to work for her livelihood. All
on a sudden, Ever Ready man comes and stares at her, kicked some of her leather scraps into the gutter and then walked away, lathi in hand. But the old woman is calm and composed and continues to do her work. Her non-violent attitude is amazing to Mira, the college teacher, whose passion rises at the flicker of anger. Mira, an educated, a college teacher, seems to derive her strength for action from the subaltern voices. The final chapter of the novel pictures how a woman from a village, narrates the everyday atrocities in Hyderabad. She boldly raises her voice against the centre for the marginalized. This shows that the subaltern also can speak and it shall surely be heard. The next speaker in the crowd is Maitreyi, a sweeper in the police station. She is the only eye witness of the rape. She describes how Rameeza is “dragged up the steps” and later “thrown into the cell”. On hearing the voices of the subdued Mira states: “Listening to her voice my ears grew swollen, like wheat filled with water, afloat on a swamp. I felt my body stuck in its place. I could barely lift my hand to push back the strands of hair that were crowding into my eyes” (88).

The next speaker is also a woman. She is introduced as Rosamma from the hill country. She says, “Overcome oppression, down with chains” (89). She pats on Mira’s shoulder and says, “You must not be afraid to use knives. How also should we reach the new world?” (90). Mira now understands that the marginalized have to sustain their anger so that a day will come for them to reap justice, liberty and equality, with the help of the sickles they carry. Alexander questions the value of non-violence of Gandhi, because it almost fails to bring a change in the lives of the poor and the subdued as seen in the life of the cobbler woman. Unless women take up the “knife of justice” (90), there is little chance for freedom and justice. The subaltern must speak, speak on louder and louder one by one and then must go in for action, just like the woman from a village, a Maitreyi and a Rosamma.

Thus Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. Alexander does not stop merely with the recording of female bodily trauma. In this novel, she suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women’s movements that she witnessed in her formative years. Alexander suggests that there is a possibility of the uplift of the poor and destitute if only a little bit of co-operation is found in every individual. Mira is an ordinary woman who is ready to embrace the subdued wherever she finds. Her heart wells up whenever she sees women being subdued in the hands of the cruel patriarchy. Her anger is beautifully canalized into positive actions and she is very much sure that there shall definitely be a cure though it may be a slow process. The novel ends with a positive note thus; “Her (Rameeza’s) mouth was healing slowly” (107). Mira wishes a “heavy rain must fall” (106) on the fire which had been lit in water.
In *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experiences*, Meena Alexander proclaims epigrammatically that “the task of making of memory. This is the dark woman’s burden” (144). Born a Syrian Christian in India, immigrated to the United States after receiving a PhD in English literature in the United Kingdom and teaching at Universities in India, Alexander knows from her own diasporic and migratory experiences the immense difficulty of taking up this self-assigned task. Not only does she have to work through the postcolonial shadow of the British Raj in the land of her immigration, Alexander also needs to reorient herself to the identification of a South Asian American woman and participate in the struggles of the larger ethnic community called Asian America. Writing – writing back to the empire and writing about diaspora and immigration - is her way of accomplishing the task of memory - making, although the act of writing is always “scented” by gendered prohibitions, Alexander also writes to give shape and voice to “the dark woman” since, as Alexander states: “What she is has no ready shape. It is all still to be invented. She needs an aesthetic that can rework the discord of the senses, clarify the violations of empire” (145).

In *Nampally Road*, Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women’s movements that she witnessed in her formative years. Returning to India in the mid-1970s, Alexander was exposed to many progressive grassroots people’s movements like Chipko, in which Indian women played a leading role and inspired other struggles for environmental justice worldwide. The backdrop of these movements would have had at least an indirect or unconscious impact in shaping Alexander as a third-world or postcolonial feminist, a feminism which brings the intellectual legacy of 1970s French and American feminism into a productive dialogue with many struggles for social justice organized by women in India. By defining herself through a commitment to a particular feminist and postcolonial struggle, she thus escapes from being trapped within an essentialist notion of identity based upon homogeneous national, racial or gender categories. Instead, her subjectivity is represented as a site of constant negotiation of both the personal and the political.
References


