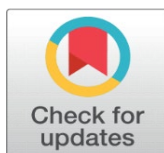
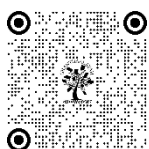


EXPLORING POST COLONIAL IDENTITY IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S ATMOSPHERIC EMBROIDERY

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DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5028

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Meena Alexander has undoubtedly contributed immensely to Indian English writing. She has created some memorable works of art not only by writing poems but other forms of writing such as memoir, novels, essays and works of criticism. Her works have always concentrated on the themes of identity, isolation and dislocation. She was an Indian born woman but lived outside India for the major parts of her life. This gave an autobiographical touch to her works wherein she tries to depict her feelings of deep despair as a result of the loss of her homeland and her near ones. She has also been called a poet of the post colonial era who has described her post colonial journey very artistically and has created intricate imageries that produces a varied effect on the mind and heart of the readers. She has also tried to uphold the Indian social values when she depicts the subtle meeting of the Eastern and Western culture.

This research paper has tried to depict the post-colonial journey of Meena Alexander in her collection of poetry entitled Atmospheric Embroidery.

Keywords: Isolation, Dislocation, Autobiographical, Homeland, Post Colonial

1. INTRODUCTION

Meena Alexander was born on 17 February 1951 in Allahabad, India. However, her roots were in Kerala. So, Alexander lived both in Allahabad and in Kerala during most parts of her childhood until she had to move to Sudan because of her father's profession. It was here that she started writing poetry at a very tender age. She was further admitted to Khartoum University in 1964 where she pursued English and French literature. Thereafter she moved to the United States for her education and career. This created rifts of dislocation not only on her physical self but also on her psychological and emotional identity. She could never understand her identity and was always in search of it. Later, she came back to India and admitted that she felt a sense of extreme dislocation and alienation during her in the United States. Nonetheless, she made efforts to make a crucial link between her past and present but failed at her attempts. Hence, the memories of her past never allowed her to settle peacefully in her present situation. She has employed various cultural experiences of her past life in India to cope with the present. This creates varied feelings of despair and hopelessness on her mental self. She tries to vent out her feelings through her literary works.

Meena Alexander emerges out as a leading poetess on the literary map of India. She has tried to find out how identity is influenced by globalization and modernity. Alexander has most often tried to figure out the actual meaning of life and

what are the ways to lead it in the most satisfying manner. These two form the basis of most her poems. As a poet of dislocation, immigration plays a pivotal role in her poems. She has even expressed her apprehensions for the loss of her homeland that is almost equated to the loss of her identity when she settles in a foreign or an alien land.

Meena Alexander has also explored diasporic experiences in her poetry. She has most often related to her cultural experiences and her past memories to cope with her present situation. She always remembered the fond memories of her childhood days in Kerala that was spend with her near and dear ones. Her poems are packed with the themes of alienation, isolation, loss of identity, hopelessness, despair and anxiety.

2. DISCUSSION

Meena Alexander, an Indian American poet, portrays an intriguing patchwork of diverse experiences for the migratory figures who are either trying to accept or are coming to deal with their sensation of displacement in her most recent collection of poetry, *Atmospheric Embroidery*. She emphasizes the ontological problems of a body that experiences life and/or death, the deep philosophical puzzles of the mind, and the longing of the heart in her early work. In this poetry collection, her recurring themes of displacement, homelessness, and physical and psychological violence are brilliantly apparent. With eleven collection of poems, two criticism books, two anthologies of literary essays, a pair of novels, and a highly regarded Memoir, Alexander has meticulously carved out a way for her readers to go through those universally felt feelings of violent loss, poignant grief, and nostalgic anguish. She skilfully paints vibrant feelings and striking reactions on the canvas of life by using language as an artistic brushstroke.

The beauty of a troubled mind is communicated through her striking pictures. The poems in *Atmospheric Embroidery* are full of poetic beauty, pictorial inventiveness, and philosophical reflections, provides a visual trip via words that explores both the joy of various human experiences and the agony of suffering. The poems, which are broken up into five pieces, combine the tangible with the abstract to portray the fleeting, fractured feeling of a world torn apart by violence, displacement, and sad memories. The poems are heavy with sorrow and sentimental feelings. The poems are mostly one page length, though there are a few quadrants and octaves as well, where the brevity emphasizes intense, existential feelings. "Fragment, In Praise of the Book," Alexander's opening poem, captures her poetic endeavours as an accumulation of multiplicities. Her experiences being bilingual, multicultural, and multi subjective are therefore apparent in this passage that is stated in a book review:

"Book with the word for love In all the languages that flow through me [...] Book of alphabets burnt so the truth can be told [...] Book for a child who wakes to smouldering ash Book of singing grief Book of reeds vanishing as light pours through"

Alexander tells stories about displaced identities that are framed by cultural boundaries, physical locations, and societal beliefs. He does this by combining historical allusions, religious mythology drawn from a variety of faiths and beliefs, and philosophical theory. As with any silk fabric woven or embroidered with vibrant strands of metaphor and comparison, her poetry delivers the physical sensation of touching and perceiving fragilities. She frequently uses the theme of fabrics in her art, including how they are weaved, sewn, embroidered, exchanged, and even wrapped. Poetics of Dislocation, her previous collection of poetry and essays, defines poetry as "the living fabric connected by affective threads to other geographies, other histories, other languages, other ways of naming the sun and the moon." She compares the broken feminine self to an embroidery on fabric using shadow work in her memoir - "Fault Lines". The theme appears again in the title of the poem "Atmospheric Embroidery", where it is alluded to by Italian conceptual artist "Alighiero Boetti". Alexander credits her inspiration for the piece of art, "The Thousand Longest Rivers," by Boetti. In her capacity as a map reader and cartographer, she views this work of art and considers its comprehensive approach to art:

"In Boetti's embroidery, in his mapping of
the world
Everything's is cut and coupled,
Occult ordering—silk and painted steel
Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked
man."

Alexander's allusions to artworks and the rivers Mississippi, Missouri, and Nile demonstrate the nostalgic tone:

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

In addition, Alexander pays tribute to other poets, visual artists, and even social outcasts in her poetry. The works of poets like "Paul Celan, Aimé Césaire, and Phillis Wheatley", as well as visual artists like "Boetti, Roy DeCarava, Nell Painter, Ron Haviv, Robert Motherwell, and Wayne Koestenbaum", served as inspiration for several of her poems in this book. Through her poems, she conveys the abstract senses captured on a canvas or in a photograph, utilizing words and emotions that are inspired by painters, artists, and photographers. The poet transforms herself into a painter in "Studio," attempting to capture the spirit of her painted subject—a young girl whose mother has dressed herself wearing a white dress—and Meena's interpretation of the artist's gaze is potent enough to change the viewer's viewpoint:

"I took the face, making it very precise,
Filling in the eyes with several strokes
Reddening under the lids—fire turned
to blood,
In the end my hands were pocked
And bruised with paint
And when I lifted them off the canvass
I felt something warm,
Very like torn skin fluttering off."

Actually, a common identity in atmospheric embroidery is the child figure. Alexander uses a little girl coming to grips with the harsh facts of her life in many of her poems to elicit a Wordsworthian nostalgic feeling. The youngster is compelled to create or draw because she has witnessed violence, is plagued by sad memories, is grieving, and has been influenced by displacements; nevertheless, all she can replicate are pictures of death and destruction. In "Last Colors," a young artist attempts to depict the sad, current realities:

"A child sets paper to rock,
Picks up a crayon, draws a woman with a
scarlet face,
Arms outstretched; body flung into blue.
The child draws an armored vehicle, guns
sticking out,
Purple flames, orange and yellow jabbing,
A bounty of crayons, a hut burst into glory."

Alexander writes about her own childhood experience traveling with her parents by ship to Africa in "Shook Silver."

"I was a child on the Indian Ocean.
Deck-side we dance in a heat-haze,
Toes squirm under silver wings.
Under burlap someone weeps [...]
Where is she now,
Child crossing the livid sea?
Older now, I must speak to the shadows."

Similarly, in "The Journey," readers recall distressing memories and recognize the brutality of her childhood displacement:

"When we got to that country, a war was

going on

A mound of stones grew outside our window frame.

I was five years old and tried to understand what was happening.

My soul ran away with me. [...]

Rock and ruin, pathways of salt, scent of crushed jasmine,

Returning me to what I cannot bear to remember."

Alexander incorporates historical and mythological characters, such as queens, deities, and women who endured hardships or persecution, just like in her previous works. She invokes "Saraswati", the Hindu goddess of wisdom, in "Blue." In "Inward Sita," Alexander sees a waving Sita—the mythical Hindu wife of Lord Ram—from a manhole on a "Manhattan Street." Sita was tossed out by her husband and later absorbed by the earth. Alexander alludes to Nirbhaya, the 23-year-old Indian girl who was viciously gang-raped in a Delhi moving bus, in "Moksha." Alexander has the ability to give these many female viewpoints more weight and credibility by combining them. She also manages to modernize the situations of these historical and mythological women and put them to use in her own uniquely feminine, arduous, and poetic language. Alexander's poetry acknowledges the role of the poet, which is to use sensual sensations, thoughts, and even philosophy to bring together the past with the ephemeral present and foreshadow it with the future. She outlines the difficulties faced by a poet in a dystopian society in *Poetics of Dislocation*:

"The new American poet thinks in many tongues, all of which flow into the English she uses: a language that blossoms for her. Places stick to her and with them histories, strands of local knowledge. She is aware of violence and warfare, she has experienced multiple dislocations, not uncommon now in our shared world. [...] She realizes that these words, composed in another place, in another language, words written in a time of war, translate well. Where she is, migrant memory pitches its tent. This is her home ground, this borderland of desire and meaning making. No elsewhere."

Such modern American poetry that recalls many languages, locations, histories of several nationalisms, borderlands devastated by conflict, and immigrant recollections is glimpsed in "Atmospheric Embroidery". Meena Alexander is a modern-day global poet who not only makes her readers aware of the disturbing reality of homelessness, but also encourages them to relate to and even embrace the theme of migratory subjects' lack of roots. Despite the growing threat of violence, her poems are characterized by a worldwide, collective call for a world of compassion and understanding. At the end, her poetry is similar to the creative process of giving birth—both the happiness of creation and the expectation of pain and suffering are present.

3. CONCLUSION

Meena Alexander's collection of poem *Atmospheric Embroidery* is excellent as far as stylistic and thematic skills are concerned. The research has also evaluated Alexander as a feminist who has worked with the intersections of self identity

and alienation. Alexander's distinct perspective on memory and how it shapes both her personal and social identity brings out her sensation of being dispersed from her homeland. She represents hybridity which is an essential part of the present study. The aim of the study was to shed insight into the depth and breadth of Alexander's literary works by critically analyzing the post colonial journey that the poetess goes through during her life time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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