

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN POST COLONIAL INDIA AS PORTRAYED IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S *NAMPALLY ROAD*

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ABSTRACT



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Mrs. Alexander, an internationally acclaimed poet, scholar, and writer was Born in Allahabad, India, and raised in India and Sudan. Her writing is sensual, polyglot, and maintains a generous spirit. Among her best-known works are the volumes of poetry *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004) and *Quickly Changing River* (2008). She has published two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991) — and *Manhattan Music* (1997). In 1993 Alexander published her autobiographical memoir, *Faulty Lines*. Alexander's works examine the disparate elements of her heritage and her cultural displacement and concentrates particularly on her status as an educated woman of the South Asian Diaspora living and writing in the West. Alexander's search for psychic wholeness through language—a prevalent theme of her poetry—also articulates the concerns facing many postcolonial writers silenced by the dominant literary traditions of the imperial past. Critical discussion of her writings often centers on feminist perspective on literary and cultural issues. In this semi-autobiographical novel, set in Indian during the civil unrest of the 1970s, a young English teacher named Mira returns from school in England to take a teaching job in Hyderabad. The plot develops around the arrest and torture of an innocent bystander, Rameeza, whose plight inspires the local activists, one of whom is Mira's boyfriend and fellow teacher, Ramu. Meanwhile, Mira's mentor, Durgabai, resists oppression by ministering at a local shelter to victimized women. Mira wonders how to reconcile the world she lives in with her job teaching English Romantic poetry and eventually leaves the school to help Rameeza. She aligns with Durgabai and rejects the type of nationalism that sees victimized women as opportunities instead of as people.

Key words: Feminism, Atrocities, Marginalized, Pathetic, Violence, Turbulence.

INTRODUCTION

Alexander, in *Nampally road*, centers on various issues including feminism, cultural retention, politics, and history among others. One of the themes of her novels is obviously the portrayal of women's issues in India. By presenting women as mothers, political activists, and victims of a patriarchal society, she brings to

attention the plight of women in a postcolonial nation. In the so-called decolonized nations, women's lives are still dominated by their patriarchs at home and in society at large. She describes Mira's attempts to escape an arranged marriage and her shunning of traditional values. Alexander describes in minute detail the roads, crowds, shoppers and the everyday activities on the road. As Luis H.Francia puts it: "with

its restless crowds, cinemas, shops, temples, mango sellers, cobblers, cafes and bars, Nampally Road becomes a metaphor for contemporary India.” The novelist, Meena Alexander, is extremely critical when she sees institutions veering away from ideals. She sketches the deterioration in the personal and political areas of life as well.

The narrative draws on many women – Durgabai, Raniamma, Laura, Maiteyi, Rameeza Be – to build up a matrix of polyphonic narratives that reverberate through the text and lend efficacy to the (auto) biography of Mira. Conspicuous in the narrative is Durgabai, “Obstetrician and gynecologist and pediatrician all rolled into one”. She represents Mother India, hard-working, honest, upright and kind, staying in a run-down building, charging practically nothing in her clinic with a tin roof in one of the poorest parts of the town.” She is appropriately named Little Mother. All the women in the novel are inextricably linked with her.

PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Mira Kannadical, the protagonist is an English professor who returns to India after studying in England for four years and getting a Ph.D on Wordsworth from Nottingham University. She feels distraught and out of place in England and decides to start anew in India. When Mira got a teaching job in Hyderabad, she gladly accepted it because she thought that going to India would give her a chance to establish a clearer identity for herself. Once she reached in Hyderabad, she felt that she was no more a girl in confusion but a woman of firm standing. When Mira started living in Hyderabad, she had minor problems about readjusting with the Indian society. Once Mira started eating with her left hand by mistake and this shocked many Andhrites who saw it. During her free time, Mira continued her attempts to write poems. She was very much confused inside her mind in spite of all her western education. She wanted to become a poet so as to establish for herself a new identity. Otherwise her mother will dress her up in silks and gold and marry her off to some rich engineer or estate owner. Mira strongly felt that she may not be able to survive such a marriage. According to Mira, marriage was a personal matter and she will commit into a marriage only when she is fully prepared for the arrangement. Mira’s search for identity makes a sharp turn when she sees Rameeza Be for the first time inside the Gowliguda police station. Very soon someone carried away Rameeza to the house of

Maitreyamma where she was given good rest and medical attention

She comes in contact with Ramu, a college teacher. They both teach English in Sona Nivas, a local college. He is highly unorthodox and rejects superstitions including what he refers to as “horoscope rubbish”. Ramu and Mira visited Rameeza in that house and her pathetic condition extremely influenced Mira. ‘I wished’, Mira wondered, ‘I could give up my own useless life in some way that could help her’. Thus, Mira finally found her identity. She understood that she was nobody else other than an ordinary Indian. The suffering of Rameeza Be was the suffering of an entire nation and Mira’s mission in life was to seek a solution to give relief to millions of Rameezas in India. Mira became half an Indian by returning to India and deciding to settle down permanently here. She became a full Indian when she understood that her mission in life was to serve India, her motherland.

POLITICAL & SOCIAL INSENSITIVITY & ADMINISTRATIVE APATHY

The main event in the novel is the birthday celebration of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. In the novelist’s words: Limca Gowda was an ambitious man and wished to turn himself into an absolute ruler His party which had been voted in four years ago, now rules with an iron hand. Dissent was strongly discouraged. Gowda assumes an almost Hitler-like persona and suppresses the marginalized. Nampally Road, which is fairly quiet, turns into a noisy thoroughfare because of the birthday celebrations of the Chief Minister. The tax money of the common people is spent like water. Meantime, a woman called Rameeza is raped in police custody. Rameeza is a young woman, accompanied by her husband to Sagar Talkies to see the celebrated Isak Katha. On their way back home, they are encircled by a horde of drunken policemen. She is gang-raped and her husband has his brains beaten out. But no one can raise their voice for any matter, till Limca Gowda’s sixtieth birthday celebrations are over. The raped woman has no voice. Her suffering does have a language but who hears? When Rameeza, the victim is interviewed by Mira, all that she can do is make little whispers and short cries. Ramu and Mira want to understand her pain. They tell her that those who raped her will be brought to justice and that people would rise up against violence.

EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN

Rape is the most heinous crime committed by man against woman. Among others, some police personnel

and politicians have also been implicated now and then in rape cases. Sometimes, police officials and staff of civil services tend to claim most rape cases are not rape cases, but cases of consensual sex. For example, a senior official of the Mumbai Police, Mr. Y. P. Singh, once remarked that "Except for a few violent rape cases where brutal force is used, most other cases involve some degree of consensus sex" (*The Hindu*, October 17, 2004). This argument does not seem to convince many people, perhaps because of stories of various types of police atrocity. People agitate against "police atrocities" almost daily and we read about such demonstrations in our newspapers on a regular basis. A recent incident, On 16 December 2012 where a female physiotherapy intern was beaten and gang raped in Delhi raises furious questions on women's safety in the contemporary India. She died from her injuries thirteen days later while undergoing emergency treatment in Singapore for brain and gastrointestinal damage. Rape, as a form of personal violence, is not merely a physical assault and symbolic of the mistreatment of womankind, but a violation of the most sensitive part of a female psyche.

In the novel, a woman is raped in police custody and two other women are raped and buried half alive in the shifting sands of the Arabian Sea. Despite strong recommendations by the Law Commission of India, several judgments in High Courts and Supreme Court as well as laws against rape, the police do not take any action, as they seem to be more worried about the birthday celebrations bash of the Chief Minister than about the tragic fate of a poor woman. A few days after Rameeza Begum's incident a small crowd gathers and agitates in order to rescue her. But very soon, many are quickly arrested and carried off in the black vans by the reserve police. Rameeza is declared a "source of turbulence". Student leaders, workers and some intellectuals are also arrested. They were to be held in "preventive detention", it was said, "until the Chief Minister's birthday was over . . ."

WOMEN ACTIVISM

We are introduced to Dr. Durgabai who is referred to as the Little Mother. The author seems to imply that India needs the healing touch of doctors like Durgabai. The Little Mother, perhaps, is symbolic of Mother India. The symbolism is made evident when Durgabai suffers from illness as the city goes through commotions and atrocities carried out in the name of politics. Durgabai also evinces great interest in all the happenings and suffers mental trauma as she suffers variously in the sufferings of the oppressed. Her

attention is wholly dedicated to a long-awaited transformation of India. "A new India is being born", she claims significantly; she has a soft corner for women in trouble. Equipped with the influence of good educational background, both Ramu and Mira, ordinary citizens in the novel, are in a position to serve the nation. There is a barber shop on the right side of Little Mother's house and a bicycle shop on the left. The apprentices, small boys, sleep on the pavement using rugs. Little Mother feels happy in treating their small ailments. She comments on them thus: "They were all picked off the street. He's 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?" Not only the Mother, but even an illiterate cycle shop owner has something constructive to offer toward the building up of the nation's economy. Alexander underscores the point that it is every individual, rich or poor, who makes up the nation, and who should assume the responsibility to shape India into one of the outstanding nations of the world. Little Mother feels upset and almost angry. She can sit and read the Wye valley poems, but she raises the question: "Why study Wordsworth in our new India." Poetic sensibilities, fine arts, religion and culture become "luxuries" that well-fed plutocrats only can afford.

The novel is a novel of protest and anger. Initially disagreement is registered through mild protests. The novel tries to prove that the anger of the meek and the humble could rise to the level of a mass rebellion, which will ultimately decimate the perpetrators of injustice.

The pomp and show accompanying the sixtieth birthday celebration of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister's utter neglect of masses, and the plight of the millions who are condemned to live a destitute life in slums, all these culminate in the eruption 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 with anger and determination against manifest injustice in the heart of millions and explodes, leading 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, 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 chappal (sandals) of Mira. She is not only old and poor but suffers from leukoderma. The cobbler woman carefully works on the chappal 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, the 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 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". The next speaker is also a woman. She is introduced as Rosamma from the hill country. She says, "Overcome oppression, down with chains." She pats on Mira's shoulder and says, "You must not be afraid to use knives. How also should we reach the new world?"

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", 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.

This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women's movements that she witnessed in her formative years.

CONCLUSION

Alexander suggests that there is a possibility of the uplift of the poor and destitute if only a little bit of cooperation is found in every individual. Mira is an ordinary woman who is ready to embrace the subdued wherever she finds them. 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." Mira wishes a "heavy rain must fall" on the fire which had been lit in water.

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