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Meena Alexander's Transnationality: Global Consciousness and Local Identity

The present article is a tribute to a poet, writer and an activist Meena Alexander, who has just passed away.

Abstract: Meena Alexander intends to share her world-wide experiences through her writing. She appears more transparent, honest and clear while sharing her experiences, emotions and thoughts.

Fault Lines, her memoir indicates her divided life like the broken lines. Her multiple migrations gave her restless feeling of dislocation. She tried to search her 'self' through her writing.

When she found herself 'other' on foreign land, she recalled childhood memories in Tiruvella and became panic. But these memories offered her strength to fight against adversities.

As a thinker Meena Alexander is inclined to the left wing of thinkers. Her maternal grandparents had studied the philosophy of Marks and Engels. Her maternal grandmother Kunju had spent her whole life for the rights of deprived class and justice for them. Meena raised her

voice of protest through her writing. She didn't have fierce fighting spirit like her grandmaa. But she firmly resisted against the tendency of trampling on democratic and human values. Her Diaspora sensibility provoked immigrants to speak out their sufferings.

Keywords: Diaspora, Dislocation, Rootlessness, Ethnicity, Local identity, Marginalization, Quest for identity.

Kerala is Meena's motherland. Due to her father's frequent transfers, she spent her childhood in different cities like: Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozhencheri in Kerala and Pune in Maharashtra. . When she was just five to six years old, her father got transfer to Khartoum. Again little Meena with her mother shifted to Khartoum in North-Africa. She completed her schooling and college education in Khartoum and went to England to achieve Ph.D.

Again she returned to India and had done jobs in Delhi and Hyderabad. Meena met David Lelyveld in Hyderabad. David is an historian from America. He came to India to study Urdu language and history of India. Meena married David and went to America.

Being a sensitive poet, her mind was thoroughly moved with this eventful life. Her world became enriched with experiences like a colourful quilt. She allowed her acute sensibilities to flow through her poetry.

Meena remained an honorable teacher –cum-poet in American universities. Yet as a black Indian woman, she was tortured with the disgusting looks of some foreigners. She was insulted with the words: "You black bitch!" These words rejected her being human.

Though Meena was from Christian family but for some crooked foreigners she was a black lady belonged to India.

Meena got worldwide honour as a writer and as a sensitive poet. But she always realized herself in a baseless hanging position. She suffered too much with this hanging feeling.

Teenager Meena's mind hovered over the desert in Khartoum and moved to linger in the deep greenery of Tiruvella. Her ancestral house in Tiruvella belonged to her grandmother. In this house Meena mol enjoyed her total privilege to live freely like a butterfly. Her childhood reminiscences and fresh Nature forced Meena to visit Tiruvella again and again.

When Meena found herself in depression, she embraced a tree and tried to overcome her depression. She became deeply involved into her childhood memories at Tiruvella.

Malayalam was Meena's mother tongue, she could understand Malayalam but she could not read and write in Malayalam. As a child, she lived in Allahabad and became friendly with Hindi language. Due to her short stay in Pune, she knew Marathi. She went to British school in Khartoum to learn correct English and Received Pronunciation. While living in Hyderabad, she became well-acquainted with Urdu language. Meena was a multilingual polyglot. But she had regret for not having intimate union with her mother tongue, Malayalam. Actually Malayalam is expected as the language of her sensitive expression through poetry.

Meena had been longing for her own land where she may wander freely and proudly. She is in search of her own people who loved her beyond her colour, virtues and vices.

Meena had life long waiting for the horde of the people who want to break the chains of discrimination. This horde would sing a song of humanity. They would have been singing a song

of humanity. They would have been proceeding from the desert of Khartoum via America and resting in Kerala's land of paradise. Meena was expecting to join the fault lines with the foot prints of the horde of people singing the song of humanity.

Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* depicts the mental struggle and struggle of survival in different graphic fragments. This memoir is the sensitive story of Diaspora.

Though her life is enriched with a lot of experiences but her mind has an ache of rootlessness. Her mind struggles to have sure homeland to rest, her ethnic roots brought her to Tiruvella.

Her struggling mind asks, "And what of all the cities and small towns and villages I have lived in since birth : Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, all within the boundaries of India; Khartoum in the Sudan; Nottingham in Britain; and now this island of Manhattan? How should I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?"[P: 1]

Actually to expand one's own circle of experiments is a great activity, full of thrills and challenges. But when she found herself as a victim of superiority complex of the foreigners, she became depressed. She experienced racial, gender and colour discriminations.

Even she struggled while selecting a suitable language for her expression. She selected English because in Khartoum she went to British school to learn correct and Standard English. She found herself comfortable in English. Though Malayalam was her mother tongue but she could not read and write Malayalam. Her poetry would bloom in Malayalam if she would acquire her mother tongue with all its grace.

While Kamala Das, from Kerala, wrote poetry in both languages: Malayalam her mother tongue and English as the medium of her expression

Meena thought about her dislocation, her identity and her existence. Her longing for homeland made her restless woman cracked by multiple migrations. She accepted her ever moving life and faced its complex challenges.

Her inner mind struggled with a series of questions like: "Where did I come from? How did I become what I am? How shall I start to write myself, configure my "I" as other, image this life I lead, here, now, in America? What could I ever be but a mass of faults, a fault mass?" [p:2]

She found meaning of 'fault' as 'Deficiency', 'Lack' or 'Want of something.' Geological meaning of 'fault' is: 'Fault of Dislocation,' 'Fault of upheaval,' and 'Fault of Denudation.

A solid mass or fault stuff or a rock came into existence when there is adjoining of the fragments of rocks. A newly formed stuff is known as 'Fault rock'. Meena found herself like that 'Fault rock.' It has its own stuff and power but lacks specific identity.

Meena's maternal grandparents, Kunju and Ilya were active participants in Indian freedom fighting movement. Both were followers of Mahatma Gandhi. Meena's maternal grandmother, Kunju was a lady of courage. It was very difficult task to get higher education, especially for women during the pre-independence period. Kunju went to Madras and gained an M.A. Degree in English literature from Presidency College. She chooses her life partner at the age of twenty eight. She was nominated to the Travancore Legislative Assembly and became the first lady member of Assembly. Thus, Meena got great matriarchal legacy of learning, literature, social and political works.

Meena married David and went to America in 1979. She found it difficult to adjust herself in Manhattan, to bridge past and present was hard for her. She thought that she was a lady with the cracked identity, the fault line.

Her confused mind exclaimed, "My own soul seemed to me, then, a cabbage like thing, closed tight in a plastic cover, my two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation".[p:15]

She realized that nobody was there to rescue her, to catch her from the rootless position. Her body had lost its solid state and turned it to fluid. Meena narrated her dream, "I fell and fell and there was no swing or helicopter, or trapdoor from heaven. I fell in a hot, unswerving motion that turned my body into fluid". [P: 20]

Meena's subconscious mind worked in a dream. It tried to find out the land to establish existence. Some of the migrations were imposed upon her, some were the forces of circumstances. Meena's life became an uncontrolled tide, a tide has to flow continuously, and there is longing for the origins.

At the age of five she went to Khartoum and her life changed totally. She had to cope up with different surrounding, different climate and even her language changed. She had to learn Arabic. Meena said, "My life shattered into little bits and pieces. In my dreams, I am haunted by thoughts of a homeland I will never find." [P: 27]

Meena as a child of seven at Khartoum got confused. Her sensitive mind was tried to find out answers of the questions: 'Where did my Khartoum life go when I was in Kozencheri or

Tiruvella? And what of this life of rock and stone, under the thick green leaves of Kerala, when I was living in a desert land so far away? Where was I at any one time? What was I?" [P: 77, 78]

Meena's life as a child was just a dream. She didn't realize its actuality. Her mind struggled to know about her identity, and existence. Meena became the victim of inferiority complex because of the worst treatment, she got from her school. She kept mum, as if she was dumb. But actually she was resisting. Sensitive Meena became more introvert with this experience.

As a young teacher at the Jesuit University, she was insulted by the chairperson of her department. He wanted to dictate her topics of writing. She was marginalized as an Indian woman.

David was Meena's own choice. Both loved each other and married. But she had to leave India against her will. Meena never wanted to be a mere housewife. She was a woman with self esteem, highly qualified, having her own identity as a poet. Moreover, she wanted to make up her own history, to find out her original roots and to be one with Tiruvella's Nature.

She had to regain a writer's spirit. Her new life in America was a big challenge for her. In the first two years of their marriage, they moved eleven times. She said, "I wanted to breathe the clean air of America. But where would I find it". [p; 164]

Meena felt that she had lost her soul. She tried to identify herself with her mother's condition. Meena realized her mother's feeling of dislocation. Her Amma lost her own mother when she was quite young. Then she married a man selected by relatives for her. She went abroad with him. And after some years she went to New York to take care of her newly born

grandchild. Thinking about her mother, Meena wrote, "What she felt inside her gave me no room, and I did not have the suppleness of spirit to speak to her, to comfort her." [p: 163]

Meena felt a mother weight, a gravitational pull. She wanted to put down this burden and to have frank dialogue between a mother and a daughter.

The Asian and the Negroes had faced apartheid and the racial discrimination in America. Especially, Meena spoke about the days in the decade 1980-1990.

The brown, the black and the Asian youths were the targets of all types of torture. Indian women in America were sometimes forced to wear western clothes.

Dislocation or displacement was not the only problem related to Meena's depression. But the third world people in developed countries like America have to lose their honour and self-esteem. They are always at the sharp point of suspicion. These dislocated souls want to share their agonies.

For Meena 'Writing' was the only way of purgation. She shared her feelings with Gouri, "You know, I don't think I could survive if I didn't write." [p: 176]

Meena's struggling mind exclaimed: 'I felt I was cut down the middle. Bisected the heart is Bisected! Is that the right word?' [p: 198]

Meena insisted that the third world poets and writers must develop their culture of decolonization and ethnicity. Through their writing, they must evoke a chaos, a power co-equal to the injustices faced by them.

Meena was an eye witness of the maniac and inhuman attack on the World Trade Center of the New York City. The date was September 11, 2001. Meena writes, "The devastation is enormous mountains of rubber and metal and glass and innocent lives blown to tiny bits." [P: 283]

The migrated people in America were suspected as the terrorists.

Meena faced inner and outer struggle. As a child, it was difficult to survive on foreign land like Khartoum; she had to leave warmth of Kerala soil and Nature. For higher education, again she went to Nottingham. After completion of education, she decided to settle down in India. But her life turned its mode towards America. She married an American and went to America.

She always felt herself dislocated marginalized, and faced the issues like apartheid, third world woman. Emotionally she was deeply attached to her motherland, Tiruvella in Kerala. Her reminiscences and memories are deeply rooted in Kerala soil. Her writing was the only way to express her upheavals and struggles.

Catharine R. Stimpson, University Professor and Dean of the Graduate school, New York University writes, "Meena Alexander will be a part of the history of the global culture. She knows how it looks, feels, tastes and sounds; how it creates and splits identity. Ten years ago, she published an extraordinary memoir, *Fault Lines*. Now, with her habitual courage and subtlety and eloquence, she has interlaced the memoir's words with new experiences, perceptions, pain and visions. *Fault Lines* is faultless". [P: Last cover page]

Meena is forced by the circumstances to be an immigrant but her love for ethnicity brings her back to her homeland.

Meena, as a dislocated soul expresses melancholy of her heart. Meena's is a rebellious voice representing thousands of immigrants shifted in different foreign countries. Meena's is the longing spirit in the quest of firm homeland, social identity, roots and ethnicity.

'The stone-eating girl' is a glaring image in Meena's writing. This image depicts a dilemma in her mind. The stone-eating girl chased Meena from her childhood.

Meena wished to verbalize her emotions. She became friendly with poetry. Teenager Meena began to express herself through poetry. To compose poetry was her utmost emotional intensity. Meena's mother was displeased with her poetry writing. So, Meena had to hide poetry from her mother. She went to secret places, even, darkness of the toilet, it was safer place for her to write poetry.

In Khartoum, Meena was forced to learn British English in British school. Yet, she had attraction of her mother tongue, Malayalam and another language Arabic. As a child, she was encouraged by the Arabic poet-scholar Abdullah Tayib. He helped and encouraged her to study the classical poetry in Arabic.

Meena wanted to keep emotional bond and sensitive linking with the languages like Malayalam and Arabic. Her urge of 'linguistic decolonization' underlines her verbal rebel.

As a migrated woman Meena had a lot of experiences, there were threats to her survival. As a child she witnessed a civil war in Sudan. On their way to India, they stopped in Yemen and observed clashes between the British Tommies and the Yemeni freedom fighters.

To resist against fascism and fundamentalism through writing was a rebel. Meena dared to write.

She wrote about the struggles between the ethnic groups and the fascist groups, especially about the struggles in Gujarat.

The terrible attack on the World Trade Center in the New York City on 11th September moved Meena thoroughly. The hideous jaw of terrorism has been gulping humanity cruelly. Meena's grief was heart nibbling, the brown immigrants were suspected as the terrorists.

The 'Pen' is meena's strength, her weapon to rebel. She wrote 'Letters to Gandhi' with her powerful pain depicting violence, terrorism and tortures of minorities in Gandhi's home state Gujarat. She wrote about the horror and violence in Godhra carnage.

The feminist awareness with the matrilineage aspect in Meena's writing proves her rebel against the patriarchal tradition.

Meena Alexander's writing is juxtaposition of the elements like: Diaspora, quest for identity, matrilineal and feminist awareness, social and political awareness.

Strong courage and confidence are essential to present the truth. She has courage to express her views and to share her experiences related to terrorism, racial discrimination, communal riots and isolation on alien land. She expresses her feeling of the loss of identity:

"Baharin, Dubai, London, New York,

Names thicken and crack

. . . As fate is cut and chopped . . .

Into boarding passes." [p:107]

Ethnic identity is related to the cultural roots and native land. Meena's quest of identity and craving for firm and strong roots is a protest against senseless and rootless approach to life.

Meena's nostalgic memories were attached to Kerala, they remained the stuff of her creative spirit.

Meena admitted: "My attachment to Kerala deepened. Retained in memory, my affections grew closer, adding layer upon layer to the soil of my imagination." [p:71]

The soil and water of Kerala are in Meena's genes, they are inseparable and eternal parts of her fossils. Her subconscious mind preserved memories attached to her childhood days.

Meena's glaring identity as a Diaspora writer offers Meena the worldwide identity. She wrote about the issues related to displacement and dislocations. She ensued sufferings of the migrants, who came from the third world countries.

Tiruvella always remained Meena's dreamland, where her cord is tightly attached. She never enjoyed freedom elsewhere except Tiruvella. She appreciated the ancestral houses in Tiruvella and Kozencheri as the houses of blood and bones.

'Diaspora sensibility' is a glaring confessional characteristic of Meena's poetry. Many times unwillingly and forced by circumstances, Meena had to leave her homeland. A feeling of dislocation and homelessness are heart pinching grief for her.

In her poem Alphabet of Flesh, she writes:

No man's land

No woman's either

I stand in the middle

Of my life.

[P: 13]

Meena's real strength is in her writing. Her limitations sometimes inhibited her at the turning point. She left Maxim because she didn't want to leave India forever. But when she married David, she left India and faced agonies not only as an immigrant but as the third world black woman. It was possible for her to determine to stay in Tiruvella and to attach herself to its soil forever. Meena Alexander continued her quest for identity but she didn't find her genuine identity.

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