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Dislocated Self as Reflected in Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*

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The term 'Diaspora' which was originally used for the Jewish dispersion from their native land has connotations of expatriates, exiles, immigrants, political refugees etc. This phenomena of migration and dispersion is not new to the contemporary world of human beings. Even after the settlement of nomads as communities these people experience dislocation from their homeland. The reasons and factors for migration vary but the immigrants share common experiences of dislocation. The migrants are not only geographically displaced but they carry with them "sociocultural baggage", to use N. Jayaram's phrase(16). William Safran in his paper "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" encapsulates that the immigrants "continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship"(84). Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Meena Alexander remain attached to their Asian roots and therefore highlight a distinctive national consciousness in their works by constantly invoking images of their native land from memory.

Meena Alexander is a prolific writer and an internationally acclaimed poet and scholar. She was born in Allahabad into a Syrian Christian family from Kerala, South India. At the age of five her father's job took the family to Khartoum in newly independent Sudan. After graduating from Khartoum University in 1969, Meena Alexander moved to England for doctoral study and earned a PhD in English in 1973. She then returned to India to teach at several universities in Delhi and Hyderabad. She now lives and works in New York City where she is distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Meena Alexander has published many books, including several volumes of poetry, criticism, a memoir, lyric essays and two novels. The present paper reflects the internal turmoil of a displaced and dislocated woman in Meena Alexander's first novel *Nampally Road*.

The short, semi-autobiographical first novel *Nampally Road* by Meena Alexander offers the reader an honest, if somewhat confused, insight to the mixed feelings the author experiences upon her return to her native land – with her optimism being dashed by a sense of dismay and disgust. While the emotions are triggered by external and internal circumstances of the protagonist in the 1970s Hyderabad, published in 1991, *Nampally Road*, albeit subtly, contends with the underlying theme of dislocation at various levels Alexander has had to deal with over the course of her life. Told through the eyes of the protagonist, Mira Kannadical, an English instructor at a local college in Hyderabad, the novel recreates some actual, historical events of

1970s in the city where the titular road emerges as almost a key character in the novel with several incidents occurring on Nampally Road. Mirroring the protagonist's life, Meena Alexander returned to India in the 1970s to teach at the university in Hyderabad. The author makes a reference to the origin of *Nampally Road* in her autobiography *Fault Lines*. As the title of the memoir indicates, her sense of displacement or dislocation is such a strong sentiment, owing perhaps to the physical trajectory of her life, that she appears to struggle with lines, boundaries and environments in her work and self.

This pervasive sense of displacement is evidenced in *Nampally Road*, where much like the author, the main character Mira Kannadical returns with much optimism to make a new beginning in her homeland, extremely disaffected after her four-year study stint in England. Mira's return coincides with preparations for the festivities surrounding the 60th birthday celebrations of Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. These celebrations emerge as the main event in the novel, causing the metamorphosis of the quiet Nampally Road into a noisy, crowded street. With a huge amount of state money being redirected towards these gaudy celebrations—indicating a displaced sense of governance and power, which the protagonist struggles to come to terms with, Mira says--

I returned to India determined to start afresh, make up a self that had some continuity with what I was. It was my fond hope that by writing a few poems, or a few prose pieces, I could start to stitch it all together: my birth in India a few years after national independence, my colonial education, my rebellion against the arranged marriage my mother had in mind for me, my years of research in England. (30)

The identity crisis, the need to belong, shattered by ground realities and turning into dismay and perplexity are corroborated by Alexander's own life in *Fault Lines*, where she talks about the proximity of her faculty office to the prison in Hyderabad. Here she was often forced to hear the cries of the prisoners when they were perhaps being tortured. She refers to the moans of the prisoners getting mixed with the sounds in the street—once again exemplifying the confusion of mixed identity—being unable to distinguish one from the other yet being conscious of both. When Alexander submits the poems containing elements of police abuse to a local paper to get them published, only blank empty spaces are printed thus highlighting government's censorship of content. (127)

Similarly, for Mira—all her hopes and dreams are shattered to see a totally different picture of India which teems with violence, civil unrest, and turbulence. The protagonist struggles to overcome her naive idealism and attempts to recognize and assimilate the changes in her country. Her misplaced recollections of a glorious past and her own confusion is described by Mira in the following words:

As for the Indian past, what was it to me? Sometimes I felt it was a motley collection of events that rose in my mind, rather like those bleached stones in the abandoned graveyard the boy picked his way through. I had no clear picture of what unified it all, what our history might mean. We were in it, all together, that's all I knew. And there was no way out. (28)

Starting with an account of her years in England and how Mira makes up her mind to return to teach in one of the universities in India, the novel goes on to document some selected socio-political events in Hyderabad that depicts the corrosion in the personal and political areas of life and speaks of a wider dislocation of a nation struggling to

define itself in the post-independence era. Witness to a brutal assault by the government's "Ever Ready" men on a group of poor orange sellers who are about to start a peaceful demonstration against the latest tax hike inflicted, Mira begins to question her own perceptions and writings in an environment where poverty and misery co-exist with a gaudy display of power and wealth. This serves to create an antipathy in Mira, who begins to question her own writing and her perspectives on life. She realizes, much to her dismay, that her world of writing was such where "words made no sense that could hold together. The lines sucked in chunks of the world, then collapsed in on themselves." An environment of "too much poverty and misery" leads her to reconcile to the fact that these chaotic circumstances do not "permit the kinds of writing" she had "once learned to value"(32). The protagonist finally comes to conclude "no one needed my writing. It could make no difference" (28).

When the tumult within Mira calms, which was caused "when I began my English sojourn I found myself at a great disadvantage as far as the loneliness of life was concerned. I suffered from dislocation", (29) she starts getting involved with the people around her. Mira's blossoming friendship with her male colleague Ramu, enhances her socio-political awareness, while her growing fondness for the kind Dr. Durgabai or little mother as she is called gives her a renewed sense of hope that helps her deal with her own troubled emotions and to recontextualize herself in these changed times.

In *Nampally Road*, Meena Alexander provides us with an opportunity to look at the politics of 1970s India when many political rights and civil liberties were curtailed. Mira's concept of nationalism is distorted by the neo-colonial elites (govt. bureaucrats) who misuse their political power to assault and batter the poor, downtrodden people. Through the depiction of events in this slender novel Meena Alexander touches upon the central issues of the endemic police corruption and state-sanctioned violence. This issue marks Alexander's own concern over the larger global question of ethics and identity surrounding contemporary nation-states where governments use force to curb civil liberties and raise questionable laws that curtail privacy.

The rape of Rameeza Be by drunken policemen proves to be the turning point for the the novel. Alexander gives a fictional form to a true episode of the rape of a Muslim woman Rameeza Be. On March 30, 1978 when she was returning from a late night movie show with her husband, Rameeza was dragged and detained in the police station where she was raped and beaten the whole night. Her husband was beaten to death when he refused to pay four hundred rupees to the police. In order to avenge the gangrape of Rameeza Be, the infuriated community in the novel, burns the police station and liberates Rameeza from police custody. As a consequence, a curfew is imposed in Hyderabad in the days leading up to a general election. Alexander depicts the grim reality of senseless political violence, where the authoritarian rule and reign of the corrupt chief minister Limca Gowda creates a political climate that curbs freedom of expression. This is where the novel offers a perfect blend of fact and fiction, portraying an India that teems with terror, violence, confusion and turmoil, thus adding to Mira's (and by extension Meena's) sense of disquiet about the choices she has made in her own life and those of the country and people in power. Thus by emphasizing on a deep national consciousness in her text and by constantly foregrounding the deep discontentment and disappointment of the protagonist with the contemporary nation, the author interrogates the status quo of the power structure.

The protagonist, exemplifying Meena's own alter-ego, finds it very difficult to

maintain a balance between her life of writing and the grim realities that surround her. The catastrophic events of Rameeza's life force Mira to ponder over the glorified concept of nationalism and her own identity as a writer. Mira begins to feel that her drafts are void of clarity and completion even when there is a stack of notebooks under her bed. Her world of writing seems to appear trivial in an environment of conflict and strife. She questions her teaching of romantic poetry in India --"why study Wordsworth in our new India?"(54) which she poses to her students in the aptly titled chapter "Wordsworth in Hyderabad."

Mira's life in England was one of dislocation and exile and this made her realize that "the self is always two. Always broken." and she remarks "given the world as it is, there's nowhere people like us can be whole. The best I can do is leapfrog over the cracks in the earth, over the black fissures"(92).

Alexander raises larger questions on dislocation of power in the powerful citing then prime minister Indira Gandhi who "buying her mascara from Bergdorf's—abruptly withdrew all civil liberties and drafted antiterrorism bills that could throw any citizen in jail without overt reason"(3). In the novel, Mira questions herself about Mahatma Gandhi's grand vision "what would he have made of us, our lives fractured into the tiny bits and pieces of a new India?"(47).

At this juncture where failed ideals haunt her psyche, Mira turns to "little mother" Durgabai for companionship, emotional refuge and guidance. Her widowed physician friend proves to be a true mentor of Mira in her endeavour to assimilate her past and her present in the context of contemporary India. Mira expresses her feelings thus:

I closed my eyes to listen better. I loved her voice. It wove the world together. It made a past. Listening to her, I lost the bitter sense I often had of being evicted, of being thrust out of a place in which lives had meanings and stories accreted and grew. The present was flat and sharp and broken into pieces. There was tear gas in the present and a woman's terrible cry still hovering over a burnt out police station.(69)

Thus, it is Durgabai who becomes instrumental in the awakening and reconstruction of Mira's values. Mira acquires strength and inspiration from her old physician friend and finds herself entering "from one woman's body into another. From this Mira ...into Little Mother, into Rameeza, into Rosamma, into that woman in the truck on the way to the public gardens" (92-93).

Thus, the recurrent theme of dislocation of self and the need to find an identity for oneself culminates in Mira (and Meena) trying to redefine the landscape of the contemporary practices.

The inner turmoil that Mira undergoes drives her to forsake her intellectual realm of Romantic poets and join her lover Ramu's world of political activism in order to express a sense of solidarity with Rameeza Be. She realizes that "The life that made sense was all around me in Little Mother and Ramu and the young students, the orange sellers and the violent and wretched, ourselves included. It was all already there"(28). Thus, Mira moves out of her intellectual domain of daffodils, Wordsworth and Indian English classroom where she had been "mouthing unreal words" (47) and becomes an active participant to change the state of affairs. Eventually, Mira lands up being Rameeza Be's advocate and joins hands with Durgabai and Ramu in fighting for social justice.

Even as she takes up the cause, the sense of dislocation and displacement of inner self continues for the protagonist and the author. Mira is greatly disturbed to hear

about the traumatic experience of Rameeza Be. Her experiences haunt Mira and as a result she has a nightmare. In the dream, Mira sees a pyramid of bricks. The bricks consist of human flesh and Mira clings to these bricks in order to save herself from drowning in the rushing black waters. Then she sees a small fire in water which seems to approach her while she is still clinging to the bricks of flesh. When Mira narrates her dream to Durgabai, the old woman easily perceives that it is related to Mira's meeting with Rameeza Be in the prison. Mira confronts Rameeza Be for the second time in the house of Maitreyi. Rameeza is so terrified after her terrible experience that she is unable to say anything. Instead she starts drawing something on a paper with a pencil. Ramu relates the drawing to the burnt down police station where Rameeza had experienced brutality at the hands of the Indian police but Mira recalls her dream and at once realizes the connection between the drawing and the pyramid of her dream. This nightmare and the attempt to interpret the dream suggests how the author is trying to find her own moorings, and gauge meaning and implications of everything in life.

The last and the final meeting of Rameeza Be and the protagonist Mira takes place in the courtyard of Durgabai's house. This is the time when Limca Gowda's cardboard city erupts in flame. The fiery finale is the result of the pent up anger and feelings of the meek and humble. Mira returns home to find Rameeza waiting for her. The novel ends on this strange and curious note: "Our walls were crumbling. I looked at Rameeza. She edged closer to me. Her mouth was healing slowly"(107). Basu interprets this as-"[I]n a novel which began with a very bleak representation of political repression, the ending is one that envisions the possibility of transformation" (226).

Yet even with an optimistic take, wherein Mira, along with Durgabai becomes occupied with the rehabilitation of Rameeza Be. To see the transformation of a peace loving and economically secure Mira Kannadical, joining the crowd to protest against injustices reflect the author's innermost doubts and confused emotions regarding identity and meaning and her own attempts to deal with dislocation of space, time, memory, perceptions and virtual and real worlds.

In an interview with Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasiyah, Meena Alexander gave a statement with regard to the novel "[W]hat I try to do is give voice to these very simple human experiences of longing and love and loss-all the stuff that makes us what we are - but within this complicated, unstable world, shifting within diasporic and migrant spaces, where identities are contested, where they cannot be taken for granted. Because that's the world I know" (88). Through this statement Meena Alexander reveals her own angst caused by dislocation and her persistent endeavour to define the 'self'.

Again in an interview with Ruth Maxey, Meena is asked the question as to why she defends her decision to teach Wordsworth's works in India. To this question she replies "In picking Wordsworth, I have to admit to a pained love that is not easy to speak of an attachment so deep that sometimes I have felt it would be easier to deny it." Alexander adds that Wordsworth's "words cut straight to the heart of my childhood- the trauma, the blessing, the interior life the child bears within"(189). In another conversation with Ruth Maxey in MELUS, Meena discusses her reference to the image of fire in her novel. Alexander explains that she used the great Buddhist sage Nagarjuna's epigram saying "If fire is lit in water, who can extinguish it?". It has been aptly used by Meena Alexander as Nagarjuna says "If fear comes from the

protector, who can protect us from fear?" This fear in the hearts of the common man has been instilled by the Indian police force which is supposed to be the saviour. If the protector creates fear in the hearts of millions then there can be no way to abandon that fear. The image of fire on water is a powerful image for Alexander and when she tries to find its genealogy she is reminded of the incident when the Portuguese colonized Kerala in the 16th century and in order to suppress any kind of revolt of the princes, they set fire to an Indian ship (31).

The reviews and criticism of Alexander's work is mostly positive as it has not only been received favourably in India but also in the United States. *Nampally Road* was named the Editor's Choice in the *Village Voice*. Reviewing *Nampally Road*, Inderpal Grewal comments that Alexander's "range of women is impressive....The novel's complex representation of India in the Indira Gandhi era, combined with the issue of inclusion and empowerment through affiliations on the basis of gender and class in both India and the U.S., effectively dismantles simplistic colonial constructs of the monolithic Third World woman as victim"(228). Pointing to the connections between her fiction and poetry, Luis H. Francia bestows high praise on Alexander's writing in *Nampally Road* "Her lyrical narrative has the eloquent economy that marks her best poetry" and Francia also praises Alexander for giving a vivid portrayal of "an unsentimental, multifaceted" contemporary India which is "thankfully remote from that of the British Raj" (74). A. G. Khan in his article in *Women's Writing in India: New Perspectives* states that *Nampally Road* is "a lyric in anger" which "focusses on the ambition of power drunk politicians" (75). Publisher's Weekly assures that "readers will enjoy the details of the Indian setting" and The Los Angeles Times compliments Alexander for the novel's "refreshingly modest quality... that moves one to respect its honesty"(qtd. in Knight 6).

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