



A SIGN OF EMERGENT FEMINISM IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF MEENA ALEXANDER

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Abstract:

The body of literature has undergone dramatic changes ever since it emerged as a distinctive field of feminism in the twentieth century. In recent times, there is a visible shift in focus in this area whereas identity politics, with its emphasis on cultural nationalism and American nativity, governed theoretical and critical formulations in the earlier times the stress at the moment is on heterogeneity, hybridity, exile, dislocation and Diaspora. Meena Alexander is one of the recent South Asian American immigrant writers who have emerged and gained from this shift in focus. She is passionately involved with issues like immigration, ethnicity, culture and race relations are focused on her novels.

Key Words: Meena Alexander, Emergent Feminism, Nampally Road & Manhattan Music.

Introduction:

Feminism is also a method of analysis, a standpoint way of looking at the world from the new perspective of women. It questions government policies, popular culture ways of doing and being and asks how women's lives are affected by these ideological and institutional practices. Feminism recognizes unity among women, recognizes that all live somewhere on the continuum of oppression with none of us completely free of male dominance. While cognizant of differences both individual and social, feminists understand that to work for women is to work for ourselves.

Feminine perspectives emphasize the inclusion of women's experience and focus on care or some of what traditionally have been considered feminine virtues, in particular, nurturance and compassion. Feminine perspectives typically celebrate virtues traditionally perceived as feminine and experiences that are peculiar to women, such as pregnancy, labour, childbirth and nursing. In contrast, feminist perspectives take women to be in oppressed position through men, and they focus on that position and the structures that have contributed to women's oppression. A feminist perspective has three features: The first feminist recognition that women as a group have been oppressed, an account of the source or sources of that oppression and suggestions for how the oppression of women can be overcome.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social right and equal opportunities for women in India. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality; the right to work for equal wages, equal access to health and education and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society such as inheritance laws. Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenges. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

The emergence of feminism has been a matter of great enthusiasm to feminists and non-feminists alike since the earliest development of feminism as the concept. One decade to the twenty-first century, we have begun to speak of feminisms in the plural and affirm the amalgamation of various types of feminism with other fields of study, indicating and developing evolution of what feminism embraces. The focus has shifted considerably from feminism being an anti-male campaign to feminism a quest for gender justice. The time has come for all of us to realize that feminism requires clear definition and more strong efforts to end sexist oppression.

Power, dominance and control constitute the major theme that emerging feminisms. In rejecting sexuality the cause for violence, the writers cited in the previous paragraph all go on to identify the desire for and expression of dominance as the principal incitement to crimes against women. Some writers see assaults including rape and child sexual abuse as expressions of hostility, aggression and sometimes even fear. In other words, it is materially significant that men assault women and girls in their sexual beings, most often directing violence at the parts of their bodies considered to be sexual-breasts and mouths and genitals. The act themselves, then are sexual acts, however violent and sexual fact cannot be avoided or willed away.

Post-colonial theory has emerged feminism as the attempts of the colonized societies, to critique the imperial project that has covered almost all the people in the world over. Postcolonial theory is concerned with the processes of decolonization, the reconstruction of the new nation-states, the communities and ethnic identities of these people. The fragmentation of the newly formed nations is another of the common experiences, leading to internal contestation identity, history, tradition and culture. It has engaged in larger ideological constructs about nation nationality and selfhood. It is coinciding with the emergence of this theory, in the middle of the twentieth century, feminism has also been actively emerged with theoretical formulations, questioning, deconstructing many of these concepts. Post-colonialism and post-modernism are the most powerful and influential to emerge new feminism in the modern era. These are examined by feminist thinkers and using these ideologies, they make strategic uses of them.

All of the writers have considered taken feminist activism within the law has given. The form such activism takes varies depending on part on the political orientation of the individual advocate and in part on the area of law under consideration, concerning domestic law, the focus has been on revealing the maleness and or structural gender of law. To international humanitarian law, there is a consensus that activism is necessary most especially to ensure that women's authentic voices are heard. Law does not in any absolute way to prevent sexual violence. Experience in national jurisdictions demonstrated that most sexual assaults are not reported and of that are only minority result in arrest and trial. That all sexual offenders are not caught does not mean, however, that the law is no value. One of the functions of law is the symbolic expression of society's values. It makes difference to women the prohibitions of sexual violence are codified. It may even make a difference to some men.

The rape of Rameeza Be by drunken policemen proves to be the turning point for the novel. Meena Alexander gives fictional form to true episode of the rape of a Muslim woman Rameeza Be on 30 March 1978 when she was returning from late-night movie show with her husband. She 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. To avenge the gang-rape of Rameeza Be, the infuriated community burns the police station and liberates Rameeza Be from police custody. A curfew is imposed in Hyderabad in the days—leading up to the general election.

Meena Alexander depicts the grim reality of senseless political violence where the authoritarian rule and reign of the corrupt Chief Minister Limca Cowda creates political eliminate that curbs freedom of expression. This is where the novel offers a perfect blend of fact and fiction portraying India that seems with terror, violence, confusion and turmoil. She has made in her life and those of the country and people in power. Thus by emphasizing on deep national consciousness in her novel and by constantly foregrounding the deep discontentment and disappointment of the protagonist with the contemporary nation, the author interrogates the status of the power structure.

The climax of the novel is the rape of Rameeza Be by a group of policemen. This brutal attack against members of a disenfranchised minority triggers a series of violent events: the police station is burnt down by an angered crowd and the city is besieged by riots that bring people together from the lower castes and classes. The rape of Rameeza Be, like little Meena Alexander's attachment to the stone-eating girl before, will be the turning point in Mira's life, the catalyst that will let her go beyond the monochrome political activism of her lover, Ramu, who will gradually be replaced by Rameeza Be in Mira's heart. Not in vain is Rameeza Be described as ". . . then the dark irruption, the eyes of an unknown woman breaking into the circle of desire, her mouth wide open in a noiseless scream" (NR 42).

Notwithstanding this was also the case in "Stone-Eating Girl," the ultimate solution seems to consist in discarding any kind official discourse, in doing away with the spoken and written word. Moreover by reseating the English language, one of the main weapons at the service of the colonial enterprise, the women in *Nampally Road* can also be said to adopt a postcolonial and critical attitude.

Like Meena Alexander herself, Mira eventually rids herself of the mask of the English language to reveal her different face. In the end, Mira embraces a communal dream language that at least, allows these women to express themselves and dream of breaking free from the boundaries and restrictions of patriarchal definitions. Unlike Ramu, who soon minimizes the multiple meanings of Rameeza Be's drawing by interpreting it as a prison and thus making it serve his political agenda, Mira immediately realizes the connection between Rameeza's drawing and her nightmarish dream of the pyramid, made of bricks which were nothing but human flesh, ". . . there was black water rushing all around me, and the water was climbing higher and higher" (NR 65).

Mira is, therefore, able to interpret the lack of articulate language as intense fragmentation and pain. By understanding Rameeza Be's ordeal, Mira begins to understand her plight, her problematic relationship to language. In the end, a community, of women bound together by shared visions and dream imagery becomes a metaphor for the diasporic layered identity. The three women metaphorically fuse to become the same, but also ultimately complex, thing. It is the national collective identity that will enable Mira to write in the future. At the end of the novel, Mira identifies with Rameeza just as her mouth are beginning to hear. Mira's ability to write herself into existence is now seen as being ultimately possible, ". . . there was gunfire outside. I could smell the

bitter odour of tear gas. Our walls were crumbling. I looked at Rameeza. She edged closer to me. Her mouth was healing slowly” (NR 107).

Like the sari that Ratna wears for her cremation in *Stone-Eating Girl*,” the sari here can be said to function as an allegorical body wrap that confirms the Indian woman to traditional cultural and gender roles. Significantly, enough, it is her head, which is capable to rethink and reinvent her, is being covered. Similarly, her dark eyes and hurt hand point to the oppression and violence that lie at the core of the other side of the patriarchal story by extension, to the close relationship there was between the oppressive patriarchy and the oppressive nature of nationalism at the time of Emergency. *Nampally Road* asks thorny questions about rules, woman’s place and notions of home in a postcolonial India that strives, still with much difficulty, to make the transition from tradition to modernity as swift and un-traumatic as possible.

Something like this kind of discipline Meena Alexander has put into her novel *Nampally Road*, which is set in Hyderabad itself, and reworked in New York. Just she keeps moving, the life of her novel as well as of her poems involves a back and forth also. She is pleased when readers tell her that this particular novel is like a map of Hyderabad by which you can go from this Cafe, into the street, down these steps, look at these public gardens. Even though most of the novel she reworked while she was living on the other side of the world. She insists, *Nampally Road* depends very little upon memory. It is rooted deliberately to the present. It tells the story of disturbances, of violation and the possibility of healing. She attempt to bring present sense out of a collage of experiences from her life, while this particular location is used to give the symbol of emergent feminism.

In *Manhattan Music*, the protagonist Sandhya is initially in an unhappy and confused state of mind. She is also “. . . a black woman married to a white man. The marriage had caused comment in their old neighbourhood” (MM 215-216) and mother of a small daughter Dora, suffering from growing awareness of the incompleteness of her marriage to Stephen who is totally by her gradual withdrawal, distancing and alienation. Sandhya’s perception of her situation is summed up in these words: Recently, though, the emptiness was growing in her. Something Stephen did not know about and could not touch; a gnawing hunger, desperation even (MM 42). Stephen tries hard to understand and grapple with the situation to help Sandhya and also to salvage the relationship. Sandhya looks at her own life with Stephen as a diminished reflection of her husband’s. Sandhya tries to escape from this unhappy situation through dreams of the homeland, Kerala of her childhood and youth.

Sandhya finds a momentary stay against this chaos and confusion in a torrid affair with Rashid el Obeid, an Egyptian Post-Doctoral Fellow in Columbia who looks Indian, “the man had dark hair, but was balding slightly. He was gesturing with his hands. There was something about his eyes, his cheekbones that drew her. He was Indian, surely, Punjabi perhaps . . .” (MM 59) but the affair fizzles out because she is searching for much more than temporary escape and simple distractions.

Neither memories of home in India nor an affair with Rashid el Obeid whose tumultuous past and cultural history is like her and who fills her with a longing “in spite of how little she knew him, she longed to dive into his past, be stung into newness by him” (MM 142) offer any solace to her tormented self. After her break-up with Rashid, Sandhya feels a sudden emptiness in her arms, nothing to hold on to.

True, that Stephen offers her a stable and sanitized world but she becomes more and more alienated from it also she distances herself from Rashid. Stephen, who is comfortably cocooned in his safe status as a first class citizen in the United States of America does not understand her anxieties and neurosis or those of people like Rashid who comes from similar context but he tries his best to help his wife Sandhya and understand the situation of immigrants in general. Finally in a chapter significantly entitled staying, Meena Alexander structures Sandhya’s reconciliation and self relocation, her electric moment of illumination and self-realisation when Sandhya knows that she would live out her life in America.

Having passed through the purgatorial fire of self-mortification and chaotic near-neurosis, Sandhya experiences a transformation similar to the dragonfly’s the bits and pieces of her flesh coming alive in an electrifying moment, the ugly pupa of *Fault Lines* finally, on the concluding page of *Manhattan Music* becoming a butterfly: “There was a place for her here, though what it might be she could never have spelt out. And she, who had never trusted words very much, knew she would live out her life in America” (MM 228).

For Meena Alexander in the same novel, art is always political, even if it is most abstract, even if it is a simple visual image of a leaf falling from the tree. Dislocation of a leaf from the tree and its multiple transformations in the possibility of becoming a leaf and by extension the tree again symbolize an immigrant dilemma. Meena Alexander expresses this dilemma powerfully in deeply felt aesthetic of dislocation that places her protagonist as well as the artist herself; both within ancestral history and in an immigrant relocation in the United States of America simultaneously. She successfully emerges feminism as a powerful writer, whose sensibility is enriched by the simultaneity of geography, which involves the possibilities of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination, inhabiting multiple spaces at the same time.

Conclusion:

According to Meena Alexander in the modern era, we need emergence feminism in India and all over the world. In this particular situation, we have to take some necessary steps to be taken for women’s

empowerment in India. Contemporary societies across the world have been exposed to the major processes of transformation on social and economic development front. However these processes have not been implemented in a balanced way and have augmented gender imbalances throughout the world in which women remained the ultimate sufferers. The situation has adversely affected the pace of women empowerment. Therefore, people require a completely transformed society in which equal opportunities of growth can be suitably provided to women so that they can co-exist with their male counterparts contributing equally in all the factors responsible for the growth of society in the larger sense.

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