

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 5 May 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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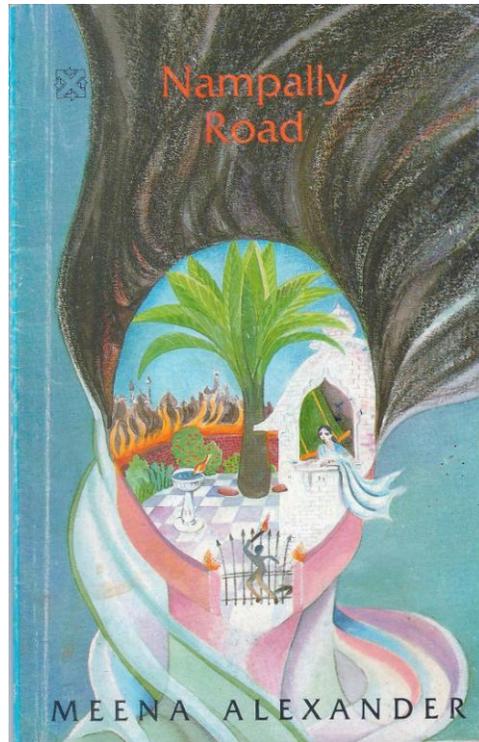
Meena Alexander and *Nampally Road*

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Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* (1992) is a portrait of India after twenty-five years of Independence. It is a socio-political novel. The socio-political novels in Indian writing in English deal with many political and social problems with focus on changes in these realms in Indian society. Creative writing links social and political problems together as it is difficult to distinguish between them. In reality every social problem acquires a political dimension, pointing towards an all-encompassing political revolution.



The novelist, Meena Alexander, is extremely critical when she sees institutions veering away from ideals. In *Nampally Road*, she has shown the deterioration in the personal and political areas of life. In this novel, Meena depicts the political life of the country as it happened in the immediate post-independence era.

Mira and Ramu

The novel is based on some selected incidents, which happen in Hyderabad and, in particular, on a road called Nampally Road. The narrator is Mira, a college teacher. She is accompanied by a male college teacher, Ramu. They both teach English in Sona Nivas, a local college. He is so completely *desi* that he gives up all opportunities of going abroad, which is odd considering that most people in India have always been crazy about going abroad during and after the colonial period: “. . . he turned down the Rhodes Scholarship that others might have killed for, accepted a modest grant from Jawaharlal Nehru University and swore on the memory of his dead mother never to leave the boundaries of free India . . .” (3). He is highly unorthodox and rejects superstitions including what he refers to as “horoscope rubbish”.

Ramu is an active participant in all protests. Once he helped produce the underground newspaper that students set by hand. For this he was detained

and held in custody several times. He always wanted to make a difference, to do something for India, whatever that something might be.

Background: Birthday Celebration of a Chief Minister

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 . . . The notion of unquestioned power vested in a single man pleased him enormously. Sometimes, at night, he dreamed that he was the old Nizam of Hyderabad, returned in new flesh to claim his kingdom . . . His party which had been voted in four years ago, now ruled with an iron hand. Dissent was strongly discouraged (4-5).

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:

Fully authorized by his own ruling party, Limca Gowda had decided to turn his dreams to good use. His office was now run from the old fort of Golconda, the seat of the rulers of ancient Hyderabad. It was rumoured that for his birthday celebrations fast approaching now, he would take hold of history with an iron hand, mix and match as he desired/dress up as the last Qutubshahi, and mimic the mad gestures of the dead Nizam (38).

Rape in Police Custody

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 his voice for any matter, till Limca Gowda's sixtieth birthday celebrations are over, even if a woman is raped in police custody. The raped woman has no voice. Her suffering has 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.

Rape in India and around the World

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, recently 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.

Rape, as a form of personal violence, is not merely a physical assault and symbolic of the degradation 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 celebration bash for the Chief Minister than about the tragic fate of a poor woman. The novelist describes the happening thus:

A young woman had come in from the mountains with her husband ... It was late at night . . . they fell prey to a horde of drunken policemen. Rameeza was gang raped. Her husband had his brains beaten out. His body was recovered from a well behind the police station. Swollen, the eyes puffed out, it was identified . . . (58)

A few days after Rameeza Begum’s incident a small crowd gather and agitate in order to rescue her: I could hear the rickshaw drivers cry out as we raced past them, I could hear the fish wives and the sellers of vegetables, all the way to the open space where the police station stood . . . They were agitated, solved about action . . . Scores of men and women thrust hard against the main doors of the police station . . . Smoke was everywhere . . . the police station started burning. It burned very well . . . a quick sudden revenge . . .

But very soon, many were 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 a “protective detention”, it was said, until the Chief Minister’s birthday was over . . . (58)

Little Mother

The novel has another important character, Dr. Durgabai who is referred as Little Mother. The author seems to imply that India needs the healing touch of doctors like Durgabai. The Little Mother, perhaps, is allegory of Mother India. The allegory is made evident when Durgabai suffers illness when the city goes through commotions and atrocities carried out in the name of politics. Durgabai also evinces great interest in all the happenings of the novel and suffers mental trauma as she suffers variously with the sufferings of the oppressed.

Standstill Progress

Development has become standstill because of poverty and illiteracy. In the novel, a tribal man, comes to the clinic of Dr. Durgabai with a child of ten or eleven years old, part of whose skull is torn and the whitish brain matter is visible. The boy is mauled by a leopard. The man, being an illiterate, does not even know the seriousness of the problem and thereby loses his son.

Durgabai feels horror troubled by rich men’s meaningless ‘show’ and the elaborate life style of modern doctors which can be supported only with the help of black money. 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. For instance, in the case of D and C, she explains to Mira that after physical healing, one should move on to emotional healing: Then you have to build up the woman’s spirit so “the shame doesn’t last” she explained to me. “It’s terrible, the fate of some of our young girls . . .” (16).

Expected Role of Citizens

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 at the right side of Little Mother’s house and a bicycle shop at 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?" (19). 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, 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." (54) Poetic sensibilities, fine arts, religion and culture become 'luxuries' that well-fed plutocrats only can afford.

Novel of Protest and Anger

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 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 anger and determination against manifest injustice in the heart of millions and explodes leading on to such a violent end.

The Colonizer, the Colonized and the Patriarchal Tradition

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, Alexander beautifully narrates a small pathetic incident wherein 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 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, Ever Ready man comes and “stares at her, kicked some of her leather scraps into the gutter and then walked away, lathi in hand” (102). 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.

The Subaltern Voice

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”. On hearing the voices of the subdued Mira states:

Listening to her voice my ears grew swollen, like wheat filled with water, afloat on a swamp. I felt my body stuck in its place. I could barely lift my hand to push back the strands of hair that were crowding into my eyes.” (88)

The next speaker is also a woman. She is introduced as Rosamma from the hill country. She says, “Overcome oppression, down with chains” (89). She pats on Mira’s shoulder and says, “You must not be afraid to use knives. How also should we reach the new world?” (90).

Questioning the Value of Non-violence

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” (90), 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. In this novel, she suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women’s movements that she witnessed in her formative years.

Possibility for the Uplift

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. 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” (107). Mira wishes a “heavy rain must fall” (106) on the fire which had been lit in water.

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The Hindu, Oct 17th Sunday, 2004 (16).

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