

Excruciation of Trapped Freedom and Crisis of Identity in Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*

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Abstract:

The terms 'Trapped Freedom' and 'Crisis of Identity' are much talked about terms in the present world. They are used as a blanket term for any transnational displacement. The circumstances may vary according to the situations. Excruciation implies the infliction of extremely painful punishment or suffering. Trapped Freedom and Crisis of Identity are the direct result of Diaspora which has been regarded as a history specific term in the 21st century. Traditionally it is a term which refers to the dispersed Jews after Babylonian captivity. It refers to the Jews who fled to other lands in the wake of Nazi holocaust. The present study is an attempt to explore the theme of excruciation of Trapped Freedom and Crisis of Identity in Meena Alexander's Nampally Road. Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India on February 17, 1951. She is an internationally acclaimed poet scholar and writer. 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 Nampally Road the present author focuses on issues of cultural richness, Psychological complexity, feminism and social politics. The novel is a narrative of minority struggle that focuses on the juxtaposition of past relationships and cultural and historical inheritance.

Keywords: excruciation diaspora identity crisis suffering psychology; struggle for survival

Introduction:

Like Meena Alexander's poetry her first novel is a deeply moving blend of lyric beauty and uncompromising toughness. *Nampally Road* presents the violent agitation, sordid dirtiness and corruption of postcolonial India. With its restless crowds, cinemas, shops, temples, mango sellers, cobbler's cafes and bars, *Nampally Road* becomes a metaphor for contemporary India. In this

novel Meena Alexander focuses her attention on various topics like cultural retention, feminism, identity crisis, trapped freedom, politics and history among others. Many women characters are portrayed effectively by the novelist. The women characters like Durgabai, Raniaamma, Laura, Maitreyi, and Rameeza Be lend efficacy to the biography of Mira. After four years as a student in England; Mira Kannadical returns to India to teach and write, hoping that "by writing a few poems... 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".

It is said that the fact is always stranger than fiction. The realization becomes unavoidable when the India that Mira finds exhibits confusion and unrest. As the conflict between the townspeople and police reaches a boiling point, Mira realises that the unrest in the souls of Indian men and women is 'too visible, too turbulent already to permit the kinds of writing I had once learnt to value.' Turning her attention from poetry, Mira looks to people and the circumstances around her to help define her. Durgabai, who is practical and devoted to her patients, Old Swami Chari who is preaching that this world's sufferings are only an illusion; and her lover Ramuleading her towards dangerous political action.

Agony of trapped freedom and crisis of Identity:

The phenomenon of diaspora movement has emerged as a result of colonialism and uneven economic distribution. The financial disparity is also the main cause of this situation. The expatriate migration takes place with a hope of emancipation, prospects of a better standard of living and search for opportunities to fulfil one's potentiality. The people who had done migration to an alien land are compelled to construct a new identity. This new identity gives birth to an unavoidable clash between

the culture of their origin and the culture of the host country. In this way they perform the dual roles of ambassadors and exiles simultaneously. Further they have to accomplish the roles related to a combination of their native culture with alien culture. The migration of many writers from the third world countries like India is for a search for an intellectually stimulating climate and wide readership which is lacking in the country of their origin. Some people who migrate to foreign countries do not suffer from culture shocks. They feel at home both in their native culture and the foreign culture; while some others fail to feel at home in both the cultures. Mira Kannadical, the protagonist of the novel is an English professor who returns to India after studying in England for four years and getting a Ph.D. on Wordsworth. She feels deeply agitated and out of place in England and decides to live in India. When she got a teaching job in India she wholeheartedly accepted it because she thought that going to India and starting a career there would give her a chance to establish a clearer identity for herself. When she reached Hyderabad where she got the job; she didn't face too many problems about readjusting with the Indian society. Mira herself at some level has experienced the agony of trapped freedom and crisis of identity because of her diaspora origin. She identifies herself with the people in India. She realizes that the Indian people, though they have freedom; this freedom is trapped by social, racial, economic or political cause. Though the people born and brought up in the same country experiences identity crisis.

Mira Kannadical's Search for Identity:

Mira Kannadical while living in England found it very difficult to adjust to the lifestyle of Europeans. Mira was an Indian girl with her own individual ideas about life. But she had to adjust a lot while she studied there. From the very early childhood Mira was accustomed to eating with her right hand but the Europeans never ate with their right hands because the fork is always left with the left hand. With the knife in the right hand; they cut the food into small pieces using the knife and the fork and finally take them one by one to the mouth with the end of the fork. The Indian way of eating with bare fingers is considered indecent in the United Kingdom. Mira was a naturally right handed person and trying to eat with her left hand is polluted and hence it is not suitable for eating.

While Mira lived in England she had to make many other adjustments. Mira was given little lessons in table manners and etiquettes by Miss Foxglove. She taught Mira how to hold her knife while eating, how to swallow food gracefully and how to wash them down with wine. Mira followed the example of Miss Foxglove to the best of her abilities but she bitterly failed. She then felt herself a great mockery. She once overheard Miss Foxglove whisper to somebody else that 'Mira was a brilliant child, but out of place in the midlands.' Mira was born in India a few years after India got freedom. She didn't agree to her mother's decision for an arranged marriage for her. She went to England as an undergraduate student and spent several years there.

Life in England was like a hell to Mira because it was difficult for her to adjust with the fast lifestyle of the European people. She tried to attend some dancing parties of the students but they disgusted her because of the loud music and the harsh lights. Mira also tried to go out every evening with a different boyfriend according to the western culture. Mira had a complex inter-cultural personality because she was an Indian girl who got a colonial education. Mira wanted to write few poems. Her intention by doing this was to find out a separate identity for herself. She wanted to make up a personality that had some meaning and significance in it. She wanted to discover herself.

Mira's Experiences in India:

Mira accepted the teaching job in India with a thought that going to India would give her a chance to establish a clearer identity for herself. Mira knew it very well that she could live her life fully only in her own country. She wanted to become a poet by achieving the clarity of Wordsworth to whom she decided to make her role model in life. When she started her life in Hyderabad, she didn't face any major problems about readjusting with the Indian society. Mira got extreme experiences in life when she saw Rameeza Be for the first time inside the Gowliguda Police Station. She is raped in the 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; the police did not take any action as they seem to be more worried about the birthday celebration of the Chief Minister than about the tragic fate of the poor women. Mira Alexander very effectively describes the incident thus:



‘Young women had come in from the mountains.... 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..... (Nampally Road: 58)

Rameeza was carried away to the house of Maitreyamma where she was given good rest and medical attention. It was a long and painstaking process but Rameeza finally emerged healthy because of the strong herbal medicine of Maitreyamma. The pathetic condition of Rameeza so deeply influenced Mira that she wished she could give up her own useless life in some way that could help her. In this way Mira found her identity. She understood that she was nobody else other than an ordinary Indian. The gruesome suffering of Rameeza Be was the suffering of an entire nation. Henceforth it was the only mission of Mira’s life to seek a solution to the problems of hundreds of Indians and to give relief to millions of Rameezas in India. Mira’s various experiences in India made her a full Indian with a mission to serve India and her people.

Interplay of Trapped Freedom and crisis of Identity of ordinary Indians:

Limca Gowda who was the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh was a totalitarian ruler and suppressed the opposition parties cruelly. Gowda ruled the state with the help of a specially created secret police organization called the Ever Ready Men. The policies of Limca Gowda were very harmful for the poor people in the state. He imposed a heavy tax on oranges and the poor orange sellers found it hard to survive so they organized themselves under the banner of ‘Orange Sellers of Telugu Desham’ and staged a protest march against the Chief Minister. The policemen started beating the orange sellers with lathis, dragged and kicked them. Within few minutes the whole procession was scattered and dispersed. Gowda assumes an almost Hitler like persona and suppresses the marginalized. 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..... His party which had been voted in four years ago, now ruled

with an iron hand. Dissent was strongly discouraged.(*Nampally Road: 4-5*)

Thus, the life of the poor was extremely pathetic under the rule of Gowda. The villages neglected and even basic health facilities were not provided to most of them. Injustice was widespread in Hyderabad. There was no drinking water, no schools and not even good road in the villages of Andhra Pradesh. The Prime Minister in New Delhi had declared a national emergency only to suppress her political enemies. Not only the people from Hyderabad but also all the ordinary Indians were constantly in a search of identity for themselves. Though they were living in a free nation; their so called freedom is trapped by the economic racial or political forces. Thus the novelist very effectively depicts the interplay of trapped freedom and crisis of identity of the people living in Hyderabad.

Psychological Explorations of Women:

Meena Alexander tried her best to bring psychological explorations of Indian women through this novel. Through many women characters like Mira, the protagonist, Durgabai (Little Mother), Raniamma, Laura Ribaldo, Rameeza Be. Alexander tried to explore the psychological upheavals of their characters. Mira, the protagonist of the novel didn’t agree to her mother’s decision for an arranged marriage for her. At the end of the novel she became a full Indian when she understood that her mission in life was to serve India. The novel has another important character, Dr. Durgabai who is referred as little Mother. Durgabai takes great interest in all the happenings of the novel and suffers mental trauma as she suffers variously with the sufferings of the oppressed. A woman called Rameeza is raped in police custody rape is the most heinous crime committed by man against women. In this novel two other women are raped and buried alive in the shifting sands of Arabian Sea. Indian women still live under the influence of patriarchal tradition that engaged itself in violence either in this way or that against women. In all fields of Indian society women are always dehumanized, exploited and harassed sexually. They are treated as inferior beings that have to subordinate themselves to the so called male supremacy. Though this is the fact, they are also some women like Mira, Durgabai, Rameeza, and Maitreyi who show their supreme strength of character. Meena Alexander

through this novel suggests a path of rehabilitation through female solidarity and union.

Conclusion:

In this novel, Meena Alexander portrays India after Twenty five years of Independence. It is a socio-political novel. The novel realistically depicts the political and social problems with emphasis on changes in various fields in Indian society. Alexander explores the pathetic condition of poor people with particular reference to the exploitation of women by the economic, social, racial or political forces. The women in the novel like Mira, Durgabai (Little Mother), Rameeza, Maitreyi, show their strength of character and emphasized the fact that even ordinary citizens in the novel are in a position to serve the nation. Though there is much excruciation of trapped freedom and crisis of Identity because of the evil political and social forces the rehabilitation is possible when everybody man or women rich or poor should understand their responsibility to shape India positively. Though Indian woman is always considered as inferior to man in every respect in the traditional patriarchal society; she can do wonders if she decides to exhibit her strength of character. She has the power and capacity to do even the impossible things. In this novel Meena Alexander expose the trauma faced by women in all types of violence and its psychological and emotional consequences and thus tries her best to show women as fearless and courageous to challenge the atrocities and injustices showered upon them.

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