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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 21: Meena Alexander

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Background

- Diaspora -a universal phenomenon.
- Indian diasporic poetry is not limited to male poets only.
- Many female poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Imtiaz Dharkar are representative female voices of diasporic poetry.
- Female diasporic poets wrote about gender inequality and female body in much greater detail.
- Their writing is not limited to gender discrimination only but they also write about other social issues and political events of their contemporary time.

Characteristic Features of Diasporic Writing

- ✓ Focus on homeland, dislocation and displacement
- ✓ Nostalgia
- ✓ Mobility between multiple places
- ✓ Shifting identity
- ✓ Cultural hybridism
- ✓ Dislocated individual
- ✓ Female body
- ✓ Gender inequality

Meena Alexander (1951-2018)

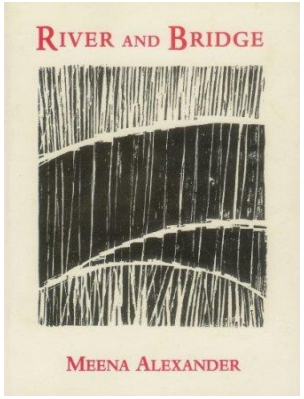
- A prominent female voice of Indian Diaspora
- Born in Allahabad, India in 1951.
- B.A at Khartoum University(Sudan) and a Ph.D at Nottingham University.
- Married David Lalyveld, an American Historian
- She experienced multiple border crossings, resulting into complex relationship between her mother tongue, Malyalam and the colonial language
- 2009 Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature, conferred by the South Asian Literary Association.

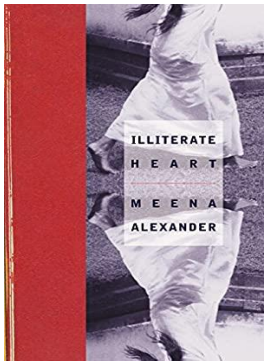
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- PEN Open Book Award, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, US & Canada
- Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center.
- A writer of diverse genres- poetry, novel, critical books.
- She spoke on various literary forums on the contemporary events of her time.
- She wrote about 9/11 attack on America as well as 2002 incident of Gujarat.
- Attacked Hindu extremism in her poetry.
- A complex relationship with her mother tongue.

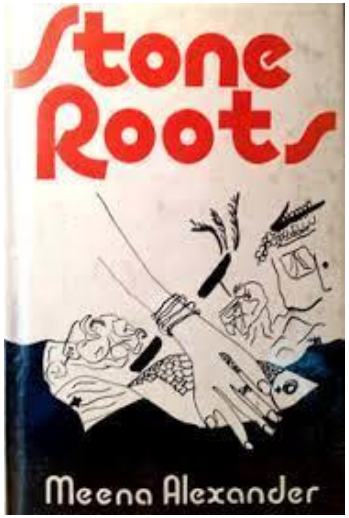
"A child mouthing words
to flee family.
I will never enter that house, I swore,
I'll never be locked in a cage of script." (*Illiterate Heart)*

Poetry Collections



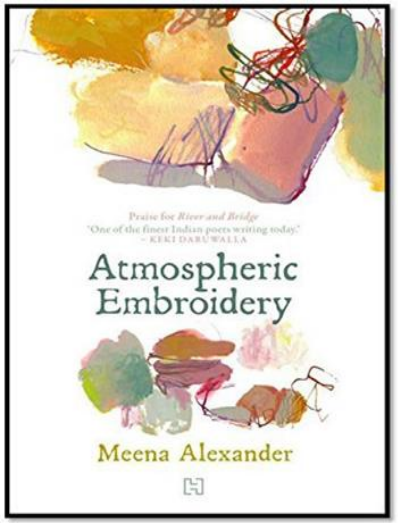


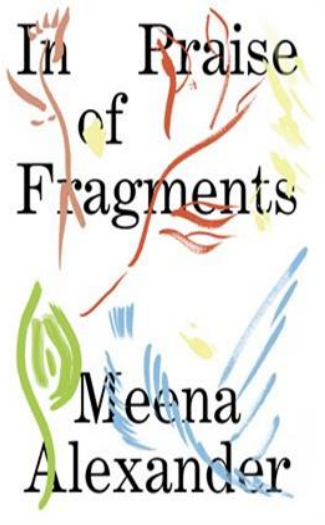
- *The Bird's Bright Ring (1976)*
- *I Root My Name (1977)*
- *Stone Roots (1981)*
- *River and Bridge (1986)*
- *House of a Thousand Doors (1988)*
- *Illiterate Heart (2002)*

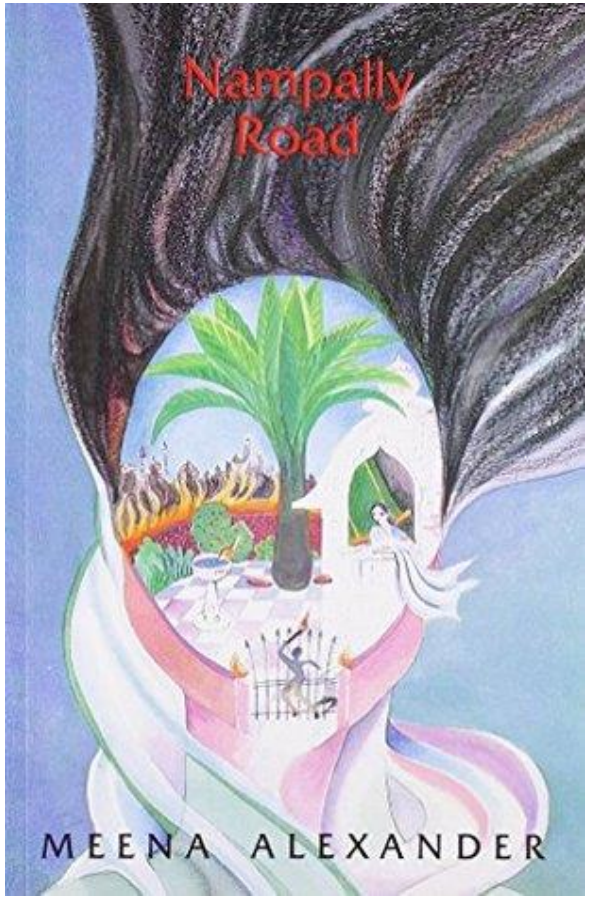


Contd.

- *Raw Silk (2004)*
- *Quickly Changing River (2008)*
- *Birthplace with Buried Stones (2013),*
- *Atmospheric Embroidery (2018)*
- *In Praise of Fragments (2020)*



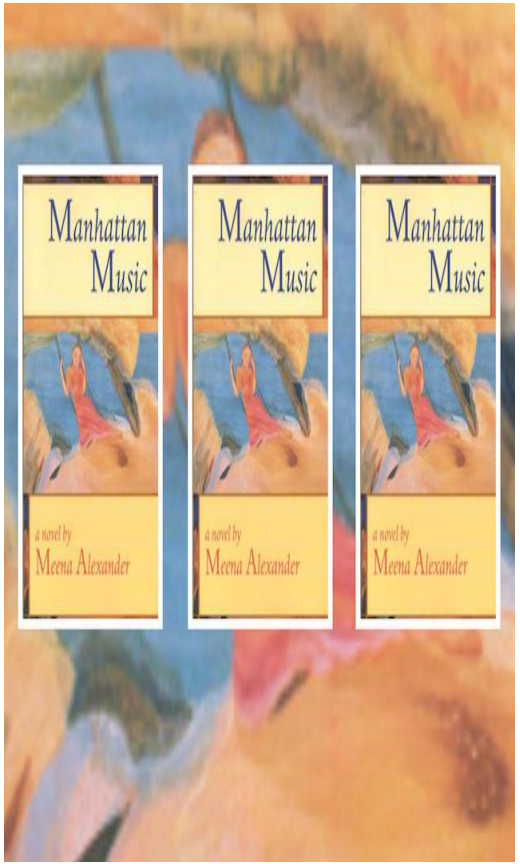




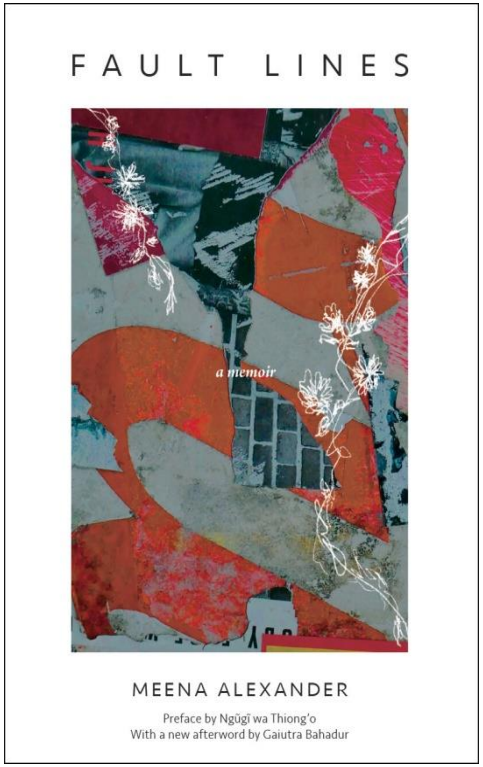
Meena Alexander's Novels

- *Nampally Road* (1991)- Set in the Indian city, Hyderabad. Explores the conflict between the protagonist's love for poetry and literature and the political reality of India in 1970s.

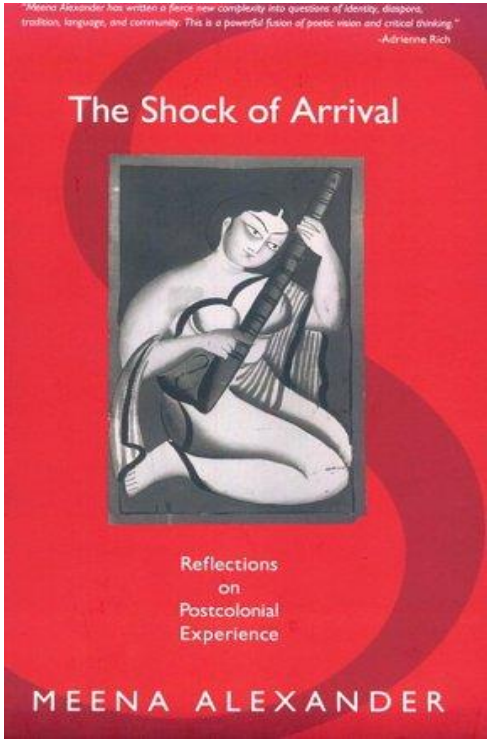
- *Manhattan Music* (1996)- about an Indian immigrant girl and her struggled life in USA.



Other Literary Works



- *Fault Lines* (1993)- It's her memoir where she shares her traumatic experience of feeling molestation as a child by her own relative. She published its second edition with Nagugi wa Thing'o.
- *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1999)
- *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009)– about female identity.



Themes and Characteristics of Her Poem

- Dislocation
- Immigration and migration
- Fracture between past and present
- Theme of language, writing and diaspora
- Exile and eviction
- The female body
- Indian social and political scenario in background
- The communal division propagated by colonialism (*Asthamundi Lake*)
- Explored lyric poetry as genre
- Personal tone

"I have always grown up in a world where there were things one did not understand, because there were languages that were not completely accessible … I think this is a very good hedge against a certain kind of rational understanding, the presumption of linguistic clarity or transparency, post-Enlightenment, that sense that everything can be known and a light can be shone into all parts of one's thought."

(Alexander to Ruth Maxey of the Kenyon Review)

“House of a Thousand Doors”

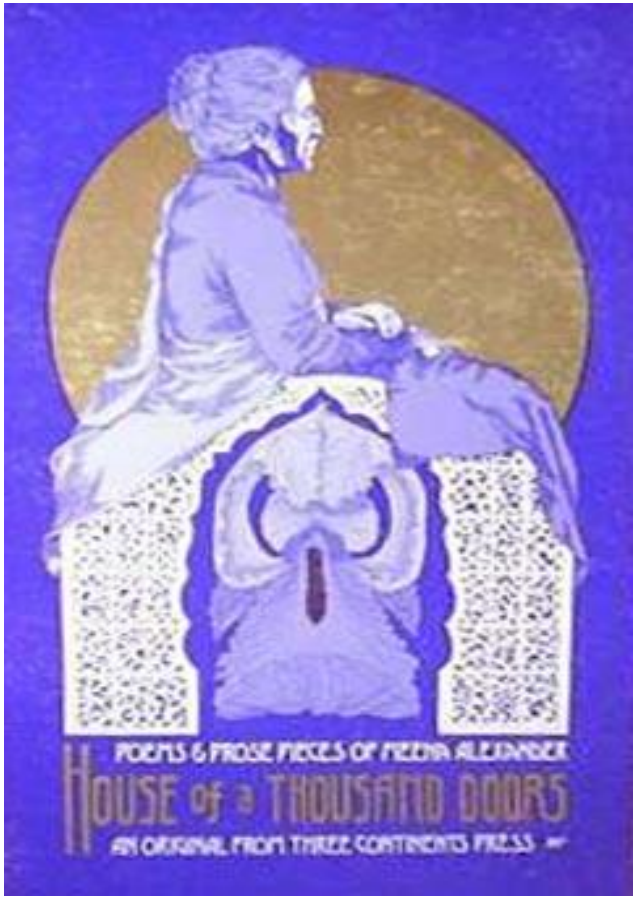
This house has a thousand doors
the sills are cut in bronze
three feet high
to keep out snakes,
toads, water rats
that shimmer in the bald reeds
at twilight
as the sun burns down to the Kerala coast.

The roof is tiled in red
pitched with a silver lightning rod
a prow, set out from land’s end
bound nowhere.
In dreams
waves lilt, a silken fan
in grandmother’s hands
shell colored, utterly bare as the light takes her.



Contd…

She kneels at each
of the thousand doors in turn
paying her dues.
Her debt is endless.
I hear the flute played in darkness,
a bride's music.
A poor forked thing
I watch her kneel in all my lifetime
imploring the household gods
who will not let her in.



On Female Body

- Alexander critiques Gandhi for repressing female sexuality in India's freedom struggle. Although Gandhi advocated women's participation, but their sexuality was totally denied. She says, ""Women were freed for political action, but the female body had to bear the pitiful burden of repressed desire and the pain of withdrawn sexuality."

"I am she
The woman after giving birth
life
to give life
torn and hovering
as bloodied fluids
baste the weakened flesh." (*Passion*)

Dear Mr. Gandhi
please say something
about the carnage in your home state.
How did you feel when they shut
the gates of Sabarmati ashram
that February night
and the wounded clung outside?
What has happened to ahimsa?
Is it just for the birds and the bees?
("Slow Dancing")

Horror of Violence

- In her collection *Raw Silk*, she wrote about September 11, 2001 attack on America and Gujarat riot in India. She also wrote about Gulf War.

"Out they plucked
a tiny heart
beating with her own.
No cries
were heard
in the city.
Even the sparrows
by the temple gate
swallowed their song." (In Naroda Patia)

from Raw Meditations on Money, 1. “She Speaks: A School Teacher from South India”

Portions of a mango tree the storm cut down,
a green blaze bent into mud
and they come to me, at dawn

three girls from Kanpur, far to the north admittedly
(we know this from national geography class,
the borders of states, the major cities).

They hung themselves from fans.
In the hot air they hung themselves
so that their father would not be forced to tender gold

he did not have, would not be forced
to work his fists to bone.
So that is how a portion of the story goes.

Slowly in the hot air they swung, three girls.
How old were they?
Of marriageable age certainly.

Sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, something of that sort.
How do I feel about it?
What a question! I am one of three sisters,

most certainly I do not want father to proffer money
he does not have for my marriage.
Get a scooter, a refrigerator, a horde of utensils,

Contd….

silks, and tiny glittering bits of gold
to hang about my ears and throat. breathe into the strokes of catastrophe,
and let the school bus wait.
You will get to it soon enough and the small, hot faces.

See how the monsoon winds soar and shunt
tropic air into a house of souls,
a doorway stopped by clouds.
Gold is labor time accumulated . . . labor time defined.

Who said that? Yes, I am a schoolteacher, fifth standard
trained in Indian history and geography,
Kerala University, first class first.

The storm tree puts out its limbs and
I see three girls swinging. One of them is me.
Step back I tell myself.

Saumiya, step back. The whole history
of womankind is compacted here.
Open your umbrella, tuck your sari tight,

breathe into the strokes of catastrophe,
and let the school bus wait.
You will get to it soon enough and the small, hot faces.

See how the monsoon winds soar and shunt
tropic air into a house of souls,
a doorway stopped by clouds.

Set your feet into broken stones
and this red earth and pouring rain.
For us there is no exile.

(*Quickly Changing River,2008*)

“Atmospheric Embroidery”

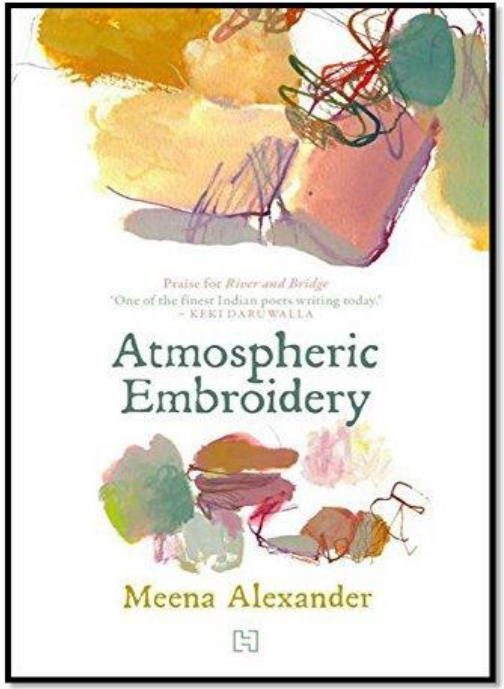
Wads of ice-cream glisten on Route 6.
We stroll into summer, thoughts thrust into a bramble

Oriental bitter-sweet pocking the hedges,
Fists in pockets, lemonade dripping from a child’s hem.

In Boetti’s embroidery, in his mapping of the world
Everything is cut and coupled,

Occult ordering – silk and painted steel
Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked man.

In The Thousand Longest Rivers
The Nile is the hardest water



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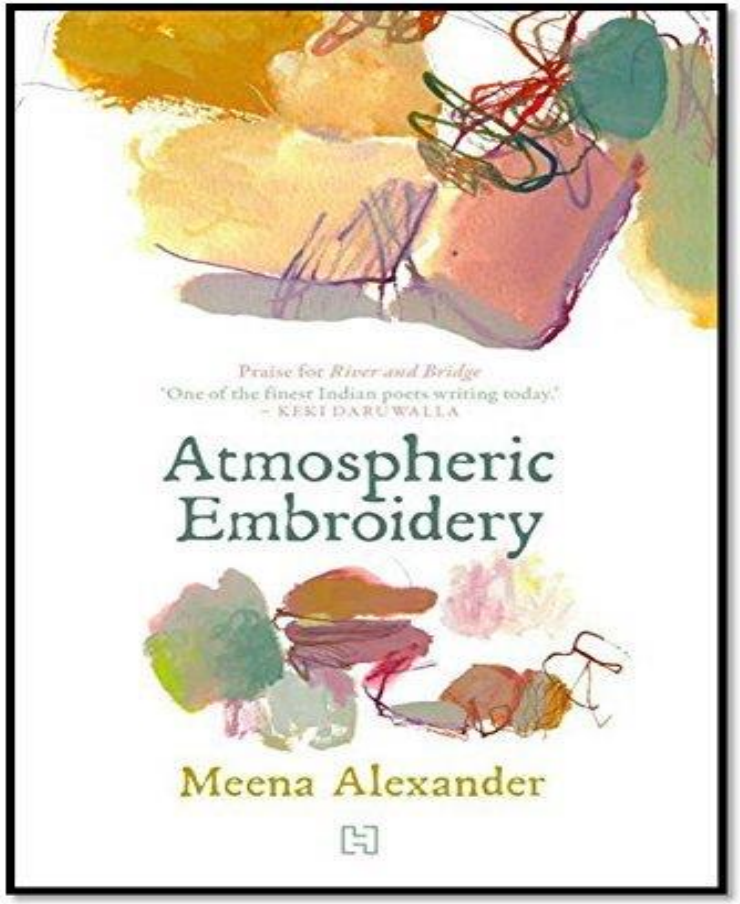
Then comes the Mississippi – Missouri.
Once we lived by brilliant waters

Suffered the trees' soft babble,
Fissures in magma.

Already its August –
Season of snipers in the heartland,

Season of coastlines slit by lightning
And smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose.

Now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever
To put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking.



On the Role of Memory

"The question of memory is one that has always been with me. For people like us who are immigrants, it has a particular kind of poignance, a particular kind of cadence one might say. Our memories are what we pass on , they have to enter into a relationship with a very different world. And we have this extraordinary architecture of memory that is part of our psychic lives."

(In Conversation with Lopmudra Basu)

Alexander's Views on Name

A woman in striped sari checks out a list of names
Hair bristling she stands in my way.
Meena Floats away.
I have no stitch of sound to call my own
neither cotton nor silk doing to me.
I'm stuck in a thicket of passengers.

(from *Quickly Changing River*, p. 45)



- " Alexander's power comes from poems resonating upon each other within a volume or as her work is followed from book to book. She has written about phenomenology and women in romanticism; her poetry is similarly concerned with the creation of the self, especially the feminine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad." - Bruce King
- "Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted."

  - Maxine Hong Kingston

Where Do You Come From?

I come from the nether regions
They serve me pomegranate seeds with morsels of flying fish
From time to time I wear a crown of blood streaked grass.

Mama beat me when I was a child for stealing honey from a honey pot
It swung from the rafters of the kitchen.
Why I stuffed my mouth with golden stuff, no one could tell.

King Midas wore a skin that killed him.
My nails are patterned ebony, Doxil will do that
They made a port under my collar bone with a plastic tube that runs into a blood vessel.

I set out with mama from Bombay harbor.
Our steamer was SS Jehangir, in honor of the World Conqueror —
They say he knelt on the battle field to stroke the Beloved's shadow.

The waves were dark in Bombay harbor, Gandhi wrote in his Autobiography
Writing too is an experiment with truth.
No one knows my name in Arabic means port.

On board white people would not come near us
Were they scared our brown skin would sully them?
Mama tried to teach me English in a sing song voice.

So you can swim into your life she said.
Wee child, my language tutor muttered ruler in hand, ready to strike,

Just pronounce the words right:

Pluck, pluck Suck, suck

Duck, duck

Stuck, stuck.

References

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