

The Social Space of Indian Women in Meena Alexander's Poems in Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the social space of Indian women has been carefully portrayed in the poems of Meena Alexander. This article seeks to explore various issues of gender in four poems by Alexander. The poems selected for study are 'Moksha', 'She Speaks: A School Teacher from South India', 'Her Garden', and 'House of Thousand Doors'. The article mainly concentrates on exhibiting the plight of women and portrays different means by which they are subjugated by patriarchy.

Keywords

Social Space, plight, subjugation, patriarchy.

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Introduction

Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad and was raised in Kerala and Sudan. Apart from being a diasporic and postcolonial writer, producing poetry that abounds in Indian themes and imagery, identity crisis and self-discovery, Alexander also takes up feminist issues in most of her works including her scholarly studies. In most of the works Alexander addresses every issue of women including the bondages ranging from social and cultural to religious.

'How to define woman?', 'What is to be a woman?', and 'who is a woman?' are some of the questions that are both simple and complex in nature. "The 'women's movement' of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions" (Barry, 123). Thus feminism refers to any ideology that seeks total equality in rights for women and people who self-identify as women, usually through improving the status of females. Thus one can say that feminism seeks to define what is to be a woman, her roles, existence, and life etc. outside the construct of patriarchy. In the 1970s, feminism began to concentrate on literature or literary texts, the patriarchal notions of the existing as well as newly produced literature. The focus of feminism upon women as a reader, women as a writer and how it differs from the male counterpart resulted in the most influential

theory of the 20th century often the feminist theory. The agenda of feminist research is to expose the age old cultural and social mind set of both men and women about sexist domination and sexual inequality. It tries to understand the social as well as the psychological roots of the gender inequality and eradicate them as much as possible. The basic axiom of feminism is that, gender difference is the core cause of the huge divide between men and women.

The Social Space of Indian Women

The main purpose of this article is to analyse the different levels and means of oppression encountered by women in the society, as stated in the poems of Meena Alexander namely: 'Moksha', 'She Speaks: A School teacher from South India', 'Her Garden' and 'House of Thousand Doors'.

Nature undergoes constant changes. This includes change of season, years and time. But the plight of women has not undergone any remarkable changes. Even though things in the periphery appear to be different, they remain more or less the same internally. Women are always oppressed, ruled and controlled by the men folk.

The poem 'Moksha' talks about the subjugation of women in society. It deals with the themes of liberation, freedom and the position of women in an Indian context. The poem abounds in imageries, references and symbols which explicitly points out the various forms of injustice

that women are subjected to. In the poem there are references to bus station and railway station which symbolize a social space where thousands of people come and go every day. The chief characters in the poem are the writer's sister-in-law and a young girl Nirbhaya. "Aged a few years, my sister-in-law.../ the one they called Nirbhaya..." (8-21). They can be taken as the representatives of women in the society. Her sister-in-law is standing on a grimy platform. She is dressed in a wool sweater and carries a suitcase that contains a packet of powdered rice, a stainless steel pot and morsels of coconut. She is waiting to board a train: "...there she stood/ on a grimy platform, wool sweater/ ...glistening leather bound with straps/ inside a packet of powdered rice/ morsels of coconut, a stainless steel pot..." (5-13). The sister-in-law represents an Indian middle class woman which is evident from her appearance, luggage and mode of transport. "...there she stood on a grimy platform, wool sweater/ smouldering hair, the familiar heaviness of flesh" (5-7). Here the phrases, 'grimy platform', 'smouldering hair', 'familiar heaviness of flesh' etc. symbolize the plight of woman, the degree of conformation that she undergoes. A woman is always burdened with many household chores and other family responsibilities. Cooking, cleaning, washing etc. are viewed as a woman's responsibilities and receives no help from others. For her everything is mechanic, dull and lifeless. 'Heaviness of flesh' indicates the burden that she bears and her obligation and duty towards the community.

Subjugation of women exist in different forms. A good percentage of Indian women are subjugated and confined within the four walls of their houses. Such women are laden with tiresome household chores and are overpowered by the male members of the family. While another section of women are physically harassed and often prey to cruelties like, physical torture, rape murder etc. a number of instances of women being brutally raped and killed are reported in contemporary times in and around us. Nirbhaya, a twenty three year old physiotherapy student is one among those women in the Indian society who was victimized. She has been brutally raped by six men in a moving bus. History shows how women's rights and equality change over time. Even though Indian women are educated, empowered and given significant roles,

oppression of women and crimes against them still continues. At the same time a large section of women are denied of opportunities, education and fundamental rights even though they have equal access legally and constitutionally.

In the poem 'Moksha', Alexander conveys the terrible but inescapable fate of women in the society through the line "In a crush of women severed from their bodies/ Drifting as slit silk might/ in a slow monsoon wind..." (16-18). "Crush of women" implies that many of them have been forced to the deep abyss of death, even before girls like Nirbhaya. Alexander shows the different ways in which both her sister-in-law and Nirbhaya undergoes subjugation. Her sister-in-law is subdued by the male members of the family while Nirbhaya is brutally raped by six men. 'Moksha', the title of the poem is self-explanatory as it declares what women yearn for the most. It is the liberation or Moksha, freedom from all chains and bondages. Apart from juxtaposing two different images of women's suffering, thus the poet through this poem as a whole subtly expresses the need for the long awaited freedom of women, and she decides to overcome that fear which is within her no matter what comes along her way.

In the poem 'She Speaks: A School Teacher from South India' is a strong portrayal of the dangers of the dowry system in India and the suffering of girls and their parents. The poem speaks about three young girls who hanged themselves for they did not want their parents to procure gold and money, which they did not have, for their marriage. Alexander begins the poem with reference to a mango tree that was cut down by the storm. According to L.Z. Marie, "mango is the food of the Gods. It is symbolic of love and fertility for Hindus, and is seen as a symbol of attainment when being held by Lord Ganesha". In the Indian culture, mango also represents wealth and immortality. But here we see a mango tree is ruined. Three girls in their teens, from Kanpur, hung themselves from fans. Being a South Indian school teacher, the speaker in the poem, who is supposed to be the poet herself, talks about the tragedy of three girls from another part of the country. The poet deliberately does so, in order to bring to light the fact that girls suffer everywhere irrespective of their language, culture, religion and

even age in different ways. Dowry, rape, mental and physical harassment and torture, curbing of rights, lack of freedom etc. are some of the dominant issues of women. The mango tree cut down by the storm symbolizes the lack of wealth. Moreover the storm hit mango tree also symbolizes the death of the three girls.

Karl Marx in his book *Grundrisse* says: “But gold is labour time accumulated in the past, labour time defined” (73). Alexander alludes to this statement in the poem in order to emphasize the equation behind dowry in India. The society sees the girls as mere objects to be exchanged with money and gold. The image of the three girls swinging portrays the entire history of the womankind, how women have been subjugated, suppressed and oppressed. Many women have fallen prey to the carnality of the patriarchal society. But unlike the three girls who ended their lives, the poet – speaker decide to face whatever comes her way in life. This is in fact a subtle call for every girl to face their life as it is. Phrases like: “open your umbrella”, “tuck your sari tight...”, “set your feet into broken stones...” etc. are deliberately used by the poet so that they refurbish the will, volition and determination in every girl. This poem however overtly criticizes the dowry system in India. The poem speaks out to the patriarchal society that girls are educated, trained and earn money just like men, and that they have the rights to make decisions about their life.

The poem ‘Her Garden’ starts with a reference to the poet’s grandmother’s garden. A garden symbolizes security, nurturance, freedom and independence and is always said to have a peaceful atmosphere filled with the fragrance of flowers and the songs of birds. But the garden in the poem is not like other gardens. The atmosphere in the garden is not peaceful, which is evident from the lines “The mountains crackle/.../the cicada bristles” (1-3). Instead of the bird’s song the grandmother’s garden resonates with the crackling of the mountains and the bristles of cicada instead of its singing. Garden in the poem represents a women’s life. In her life she yearns for freedom and independence, but often falls prey to the ‘crackles’ and ‘bristles’ of patriarchy. The reference to the mulberry trees in the garden implies nurturance and support that a woman offers to her surroundings in spite of its

domineering effect on her life and actions. A woman loses her charm, talents and becomes aged and gnarled because of the constraints and subjugation she endures in taking care of the endless tasks in her life. Her hands are never petted or pampered nor given rest. Therefore they become aged before time. Hence even their hands are called as gnarled hands.

In certain cultures like the Chinese, mulberry tree and its fruits symbolize life. The speaker elaborates how the mulberry fruit cleared her grandmother’s blindness. Every woman is conditioned by her culture, belief and practices. In many religions like Hinduism and in ancient tribal legends women are worshipped as mother gods with great veneration. But in spite of this seemingly giving of power they are actually robbed of power and are burdened by the domination. Both nature and women are worshipped with great awe but at the same time are exploited mercilessly. The eco-feminist critics include Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Joanna Macy, Vandana Shiva and Karen J. Warren. “Ecofeminism is the analysis of the roles attributed to women in fantasies of the natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature writing by female authors” (Abrams, 100). Nature and women are essentially connected to each other in terms of their exploitation and repression by the society. Towards the end of the poem the speaker remembers her grandmother, who is portrayed as “a rare fragrance/ as of dry mulberry” (47-48). The memory about her grandmother awakens in her the very thought of life ahead her. Dreams are always promising, bright and reassuring. But here for the speaker it’s an unpromising dream, there is a ‘bleakness beneath’ her dreams. This reveals how the male dominated society arrest a woman’s aspirations and dreams. Patriarchy often wrecks the promising future of womanhood.

In the last poem ‘House of Thousand Doors’ Meena Alexander gives a subtle yet powerful portrayal of the poignant life of a typical Indian woman. As the title suggests her life can be seen as a house of thousand doors. In India there are certain age old conceptions about the construction of houses. They are built in such a way that foul creatures like rats, snakes and toads are kept out.

Likewise there is an Indian concept of a woman, infixed in the culture and society, that expects every woman to remain devoted to her duties without fail. Snakes, toads, rats etc. are meant to be kept out of the house. In this context it can be the external factors like freedom, equality, education, job and rights of woman that seems to be deplorable to the society. The male dominated society expects a woman's life to be like a house protected from snakes, toads and rats. None of the external factors should waver her mind from her duties like cooking, washing, cleaning etc. and serving the members of the family. The poem also gives reference to Indian wedding and the typical Indian architecture which are the emblems of the rich Indian culture.

Conclusion

This article aimed to identify the various problematics of gender and culture in Alexander's selected poems. Women are oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal norms at different levels. Women are always exploited and tortured irrespective of ethnicity or other dictates. Patriarchy does not accept a woman's individuality or give her due social space or respect. The plight of women remains all the more same. This has been splendidly illustrated by Alexander through her use of language with symbolic overtones. However the elements of native culture with gender issues is highlighted in this article to prove how deep is the gender oppression in the society.

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