“I carry the world inside me”: An Interview with Meena Alexander

[ Interviewed by Somdatta Mandal, Reader in English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan]

Note: This interview took place on the evening of 15th December 2002 at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan (established by Rabindranath Tagore) where Meena acted as the keynote speaker for a seminar which I directed on “Multicultural America”. Amid very informal discussions, Meena voiced her feelings and opinions on various aspects of her personal and literary career. Two other scholars, Ranabir Lahiri and Himadri Lahiri who were also present on that occasion, also posed several questions to her and all of them are being integrated together for a better understanding of Meena’s oeuvre.

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Brief bio-data of Meena Alexander:

Born in Allahabad, raised in India and North Africa, Dr. Meena Alexander is at present Distinguished Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). Her poems and prose works have been widely anthologized and translated into many languages. Her works include the volumes of poetry, Stone Roots (1980); House of A Thousand Doors (1988) and River and Bridge (1996). The memoir, Fault Lines (1993), was chosen by Publisher’s Weekly as one of the best books of 1993. It is forthcoming in late 2003 in a second edition with a coda entitled ‘Book of Childhood.’ She has also authored two novels, Nampally Road (1991) and Manhattan Music (1997) as well as a volume of poetry and essays, The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience (1996). Her new book of poems, Illiterate Heart (2002) won the 2002 PEN Open Book Award and she has received a commission from the Royal Festival Hall, London, to compose a cycle of poems for Poetry International 2002. As a true postcolonial immigrant writer, Meena’s work resonates with the issues of diaspora and dislocation and according to her, the biggest challenge as a creative writer is to try and make a real integration between her personal history as a person from India and the experiences she had in the United States as an immigrant. Meena Alexander is in India currently on a Fulbright program and at different fora she spoke about race, ethnicity and multicultural poetry. Here are excerpts from her interview.

SM: Hello, Meena. Welcome to Santiniketan. Since this is your first trip here, how does it feel like?

MA: You know, it is really wonderful to be in Tagore’s land – his own place. The concept of studying so close to nature has really appealed to me. I am inspired to see the places where Tagore had lived and written. I was also moved by sight of some of the paintings that he did late in his life.

SM: What is the most challenging fact about being a postcolonial immigrant in America?

MA: Well, I know for me, the biggest challenge as a creative writer is to try and make a real integration between my personal history as a person from India and the experiences I have in America as an immigrant. Very often one tries to do this through memory or through certain
kinds of adjustments of interior landscape. When you walk on the streets of New York, for instance, it is possible to carry another landscape within you. For us, the challenge is in bringing these worlds together and fusing them because when you make a work of art, you do make a fusion of disparate worlds.

SM: *I feel there is a problem in labeling a writer like you who falls under several categories – a woman writer, a diasporic writer, a postcolonial writer and an Asian-American writer. Where would you place yourself?*

MA: Oh, simply as a writer.

SM: *But in a lot of your writings you have confessed that you are an immigrant writer. What I find interesting is the fact that there seems to be a big a difference between yours and Bharati Mukherjee’s conception of an immigrant writer, especially because Bharati refuses to be labeled as one. Do you think that being an immigrant writer gives you a kind of footage to the publication of exotica or that kind of stuff that sells?*

MA: Well, I think it is a personal evaluation of how you see yourself. I think some of Bharati Mukherjee’s best books are about immigrant experience. So, I cannot judge for Bharati. But I can speak for myself. I assume, maybe, she does not want to be put in a box. No one does. I think a lot of my emotion and self-understanding has come from trying to grapple with some of these issues. People sometimes say to me supposing you had stayed on in India, what kind of writer would you have been? It is a very interesting issue. I think that many of the things that come to me have come from childhood memories and very intense emotions. I try to connect to the present. So the present of course is bounded by the pressure of the historical moment and of course a lot depends on where you are. So I think the kind of writing I do draws a lot from memory. In a way, I carry the world inside me.

SM: *We all know about Professor P. Lal’s pioneering work in helping several authors getting their debut work published. It gives me great pleasure to think that your first volume of poetry, The Bird’s Bright Ring: A Long Poem was published from Kolkata way back in the 1970s. Also, your second volume of poems, I Root My Name, saw the light of day through a Kolkata publisher in 1977. The question is, has the focus of your poetry changed from your initial days when you were associated with Writer’s Workshop?*

MA: It is really an interesting and excellent question. Let me answer by narrating an incident. On the 9th of December, I gave a reading at the Sahitya Akademi in Delhi. It was a wonderful gathering and a lot of interesting people had come, people like Nirmal Verma, Gagan Gill, Keki N. Daruwalla, and Ramu Gandhi, the philosopher, who is a very good friend of mine. I read from my new book and also some new unpublished poems of mine, and Ramu stood up and said, “Meena, I’ve been following your poetry right from the beginning – from The Bird’s Bright Ring – but your new poetry is very interesting to me and moving, it has a slow, sad music. Somehow your lines and rhymes now resemble Beethoven’s late music.” I found this observation very touching, especially coming from someone who has seen my poetry emerge right from the beginning.
I may be wrong, but I feel that I have really changed my style over the years. Earlier I used to make these very sharp, disconnected images. For instance, in this first poem that Professor P. Lal had published, I had bits of French in it, I had some things of Jayprakash Narayan’s march in 1974, some things about the Emergency – all these political references – it was like a collage. I feel that my voice has grown and I hope in the years to come, it will grow further. In the latest issue of *Social Text*, I have this long poem called “Petroglyph” and unlike any of my earlier poems, it is written in fourteen stanzas and in eleven sections. It begins in Sweden at Stornorrfors, facing an ancient petroglyph and then it moves way on, through the border crossing of the Red Sea I did as a child in a steamer with my mother and into New York City and September 11.

In a way, I think, two things have happened. One is that the voice has become more sure of itself and the other thing is that a kind of poetic compression that has taken place. This is what the lyric mode is all about.

SM: From your writing lets now move on to publication. Meera Syal, Leena Dhingra and several other British Asian writers all complain that it is very difficult for them to find mainstream publishers. They even believe that it is easier finding a publisher in the west if you’re staying in India. Do you face problems finding publishers for your work in the West?

MA: Yes. All my books have been published by alternative presses, starting with the Feminist Press that published *Fault Lines*. The *Shock of Arrival* was again published by South End Press – a left wing press that primarily publishes Noam Chomsky. This new book of mine is also published by a small university press. It is a pity that though these books are taught in all sorts of places, there is no circulation of it in India. Though Penguin India did publish *Fault Lines* in 1994, people complain to me that it is now in the off-shelf category. Several years ago Orient Longman brought out *Nampally Road* and Rupa published the poetry volume *River and Bridge*. I wish some publisher would bring out my more recent books in India.

SM: Let’s now move over from your poetry to your two novels. Like all debut novels, *Nampally Road* is autobiographical. What is your opinion?

MA: Well that’s what people tell me.

SM: But every reader apparently does find a lot of similarities between the author Meena and the protagonist Mira. In fact they seem quite close to each other. Also, location wise, one can really identify the places, the names, the streets of Hyderabad. In the novel, Mira talks of dislocation when she came down from Nottingham to teach at Hyderabad, and this exactly what you did too. How much of it is conscious?

MA: It is really not that consciously done. But I suppose I did draw upon what I knew best. I drew upon an episode that actually happened in Hyderabad – but a lot of it is also fabricated.

SM: Your second novel *Manhattan Music* is very interesting as it deals with the interaction between two women, Sandhya and Draupadi. It is post-colonial in the true sense because it talks about the second and third generation of Indian immigrants for whom India is a kind of
concept. *Draupadi* here is a Caribbean woman and her angst for exploring her ethnic Indian roots is in a sense very real. Could you tell us a little more about it?

**MA:** I made up that character because often in talks given in colleges and seminars, I would meet Caribbean Indians who would have no knowledge of India but looked like the ethnic Indian and yet had much more affinity with the Black culture of the islands. India for them was as much a myth as Africa was for an African American. I was really fascinated by this. Now my father was with the government and was posted abroad and as an expatriate child, I was always told that we were Indians. It was interesting to me how my parents fostered this Indian nationalism. Also my grandparents were affiliated with the Gandhian movements. So it was a historical construction – a very deliberate construction. You have to know what India is. I found it interesting that for these people who do not know what India is, it is an invention because their reality is a Caribbean reality.

Let me tell you something else. In an autobiography workshop I was conducting at Wesleyan University, a Caribbean Indian woman came up to me and said that the Indians discriminate against them. Even the students who came from India did not consider them as Indians and she really felt bad about it. This ethnic turmoil that exists within all of us in different ways is really interesting. It is a part of a reality and we have to think a little bit more about it. That is why I made up this character.

**SM:** *So are you planning your third novel?*

**MA:** I am not a novelist, I’m a poet. I sometimes stumble into prose – only God knows why— and this is the best way to put it. I am working towards a new book of poems but poetry always takes a long time. It is an art of crystallization. Before I went to London to read at the Royal Festive Hall, I went to Gujarat. I have a very close friend, Svati Joshi, who works for PUDR (People’s Union for Democratic Rights) and I went with her to some of the relief camps in Ahmedabad and I must confess that I have never had such an experience in my life. Svati was taking testimonies from the survivors of Naroda Patiya. At times listening I could barely breathe. I am writing a prose piece. I am writing poems and it will take some more time. I’m thinking of Anna Akhmatova in her poem “Requiem”, in the prefatory piece. She is standing in a line in the winter city and a voice cries: “Can you describe this?” And she responds ‘I can’. Gujarat is part of our historical reality and we must write in truth what comes to us, facing this terrible reality. Not force ourselves to write, I don’t believe in that, but write what comes to us. But the question remains, how can you evoke this as an artist? How can you do it, how can you have the words for it?

**SM:** *As an academic and as a creative writer, do you find the two professions coalescing or contradictory? How do you juggle these two different roles?*

**MA:** I am more and more of a creative writer now. I do have my doctoral students but since I am fortunate at having this Distinguished Professor status, I spend a lot of time writing. I usually teach one doctoral or MFA course at a time.

**SM:** *Could you briefly tell us about the kind of courses you teach?*
MA: Well, the course that I will teach once I go back from India is called “Time and the Lyric: The Postcolonial Poem.” In it I’m going to teach Derek Walcott, Amy Cesare and a number of multicultural American poets because I think all of them are postcolonial. I’m really looking forward to that. Some time back, I also taught a course with a colleague in the French department which was called “Translated Lives: Postcolonial Texts”. She did the Francophone African Caribbean texts and I did the Anglophone texts. We had students from different departments and it was very exciting. One of the public events that I am looking forward to in this year’s MLA Conference to be held on the 28th of December is a round table discussion with the Guadeloupean Francophone writer Maryse Condé, the Algerian writer Assia Djebar and myself. It will be quite exciting and will be called “Three Postcolonial Women Writers.”

SM: In this visit to India, what is your current Fulbright project?

MA: I decided to teach multicultural American poetry. I did a course at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam and have been speaking about this in various parts of the country.

SM: Coming to a rather academic question, let me ask your opinion about the ‘nativist’ school of theoreticians in India. You know Professor G.N. Devy, the noted exponent of this theory categorically stated: “Let us have the green card holding writers to another class of literature.” As an expatriate writer, what are your views?

MA: That’s entirely his own opinion. I think that these debates occur within specific cultural contexts. I do not know what class of literature Professor Devy is talking about but I think to really respond to his view I will have to read more details especially about what he states about non-Indians. There are many writers now who are actually part of this migratory movement from different parts of the world. So what do you do with such writers? I remember telling you that I too believed earlier that to be a real writer you had to be located in one place and could not move. So this is like that. As a writer I write out of reality, out of my experience. So I can’t enter into the debate but I can tell you about my own experience as a writer. It is one which since childhood has been crossing borders – multiple border crossing. I consider myself as an Indian but I also live in America and so I also accept that as a reality.

SM: Apart from academic circles, could you tell us about your reception as a South Asian writer in America?

MA: It is quite extraordinary. About ten years back, my friend David Mura, the Japanese American writer had said, “You know Meena, it is amazing that both you and I are part of the older generation of Asian American writers because apart from Maxine Hong Kingston, who else is there?” Now there is a whole explosion of writing by a younger generation of Asian American writers who think of writers like myself as part of the older generation and so I am touched by this in a way because when I started writing, such a thing called Asian American writing never existed. So when someone asks me about how I feel about Asian American writing, I say that it found me, I did not find it.
So when I started writing in America this whole explosion of creativity did not exist. We are part of a whole historical moment and our lives are not that long. Moreover, self-invention is not an American phenomenon. Look at Tagore himself. Think of the paintings he did late in his life. One is enthralled by the extreme creativity, outpouring of different facets of his own life and his self-invention. This is great because in one way one has to make sense out of the little pieces. Think of the doodling he did in Puravi. Rhythm is very essential to live. I think you have to do your own work and that's it. I will feel grateful is someone reads it.

SM: Do you know that you have become canonical enough to be included in a literary biography project on South Asian writers along with forty seven other writers?

MA: Well, with the internet, I find myself included in many categories of writers and many of these websites label me as an “Indian” writer. This is interesting because I might be living in Sweden throughout my life. It is all part of the postcolonial phenomenon, I think.

SM: In your article “Musings on Race,” you mention that to be free in America would be to be free of ‘race.’ I was really moved by the questions you posed, “Who am I? Where am I? When am I?” What are your general views on racism in America?

MA: Well, for me, there is always a painful edge to the word ‘race.’ I cannot help thinking of it as a wound, something that cannot be cleft apart from my femaleness. I think the most devastating effect of racism is to render one homeless in one’s own body. This almost automatic absenting of ‘I’ from my body is something that survivors of trauma understand, if only mutely, and something that racism in its multiple forms is able to enforce. I have discussed some of these issues in my book The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience. (1996) In a poem that I wrote some time back called “Art of Pariahs,” I lay bare the underbelly of multiculturalism. I imagine Draupadi of The Mahabharata entering my kitchen in New York City and the longing to be freed of the limitations of skin color and race, sing in the poem.

Incidentally, let me tell you something else. I don’t want to give the impression that I only write about race. I think poetry is a very private art and I feel that the lyric mode has a very special place because it attaches to reality and then you are transported in a way out of it. But then you can return to it with some kind of an illumination because poetry is very small—you carry it in your head and there is the rhythm. One hopes there is a kind of simplicity to the poem, a simplicity that is available to the people and to oneself.

RL: As an extension of your exchange with Somdatta Mandal, you spoke about poetic growth and about how your voice has become more sure of itself. But does it relate to your craft, to the formation of your identity?

MA: You know I think it’s both. It is craft but I also think that some writers get it together very early. Other writers get it together very late. I think I am one of the late blooming writers. Now this is rather an odd thing to say but as a student I was rather early. I finished my degree when I was eighteen, my doctoral degree when I was twenty-one. I was the youngest in class.
But as a writer, I think I am now coming into my own stride, so to say. It has taken me many years to put the things together. It is a totally personal view but I feel craft is a kind of interior debate or discussion or quarrel – you know how Yeats says, “Out of the quarrel with others you make rhetoric but out of the quarrel with yourself you make poetry.” So I think it has taken for me some years for the quarrel with myself to come together.

RL:  *Does your African background have any bearing upon your writing?*

MA:  Yes, I think it does. For instance, in a poem called “Raw Meditations on Money” that was published by Jayanta Mahapatra in *Chandrabhaga*, I talked about slavery in Sudan. But I must also tell you that though the African experience does have a lot of bearing, it is almost implicit. I have written about my experiences in India in all my work but I have not written very much about my African childhood. Maybe someday I’ll do a book of poems about that then again perhaps I won’t. I do not like to predict what I will write. I left Africa when I was eighteen and went to England to study at university and I only returned in 1997 when I was invited to the Johannesburg Bienalle. Recently, I was in Durban where I was invited for Poetry Africa and it was a very moving experience. They told that since I am an Indian they would give me pride of place which is the last slot. Durban is on the Indian Ocean and the whole migratory pattern to South Africa has been very interesting. We went to see Gandhi’s Phoenix Farm which was burnt down and rebuilt and there was a black man, a descendant of the nationalist Dubey, who took us around. You know there was actually a squatter’s camp outside Phoenix Farm called “Bombay” and it was filled with black South Africans. They said that it was called “Bombay” because Gandhi had lived there. I am telling you this because the whole African experience is something that is coming back to me now. In my latest volume of poetry called *Illiterate Heart*, I have a poem called “Civil Strife.” It is dedicated to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and I wrote it because both of us were once having a conversation over civil strife in our respective countries. So now when I read this poem in India, it has a different resonance. Let me cite another instance. I had written the poem “Art of Pariahs” in response to some racial incidents in New York. Recently, when I read the same poem in New Delhi, it had a different resonance. It was felt that I wrote it as an Indian poem. The word ‘pariah’ comes from Malayalam. Incidentally, Ngugi is writing a preface for the second edition of my memoir *Fault Lines*. It will be out later this year.

HL:  *Do you find that the September 11 incident has any particular bearing in your poetry and on other poets of American right now?*

MA:  Yes, it does have a bearing. When September 11 happened, it was very traumatic because it was in the place where I live. Saying this does not make me endorse American militarism. Actually more people were killed in the first few days of the bombing in Afghanistan than all the people who died in the September 11 incident. But I think in terms with my own sense of what it means to live in New York it was a frightening episode. The racial backlash that occurred made it even more unsettling. My poem “Kabir Sings in the City of Burning Towers” comes out of this. I have written a great deal in response to September 11 – there is a long interview in the latest issue of the journal *Social Text* about what it means in the context of writing poetry, what it means to someone like me. I first started by writing a series of very short elegies that have been set to music by an American composer. I began on
September 13 beginning with “Aftermath,” then “Invisible City,” then “Pitfire’.” I wrote it in private in a very compressed form because I felt there was so much of chaos around that I needed the tight lyrical form. Then I wrote a long poem called “Petroglyph” which begins in Sweden and moves into the present. I think that poetry became for me a way of crystallizing my emotion in a time of difficulty.

I also think that one of the things that happened was that it opened up memories of another war because when my mother and I first went up the Indian Ocean to Port Sudan via the Red Sea, the Suez bombing was going on. I put it in this way—the trauma touched on memory, opened up again the passage from India to that coast of Africa. So I think that one of the things that were very powerful for me was the aftermath. After that Kabir poem, I wrote a cycle of poems based on Lorca’s poems in New York. So in some ways it has redefined me. We don’t choose what happens to us—just as this going to the relief camp in Gujarat has changed me—and until I write I don’t know how it has changed me. So these things are part of our history and that’s part of what writing is all about—it’s the small inscription that you make on the ground.

HL: In some of your books you include epigraphs. You include epigraphs from old Indian texts like Kadambari, Kumara Sambhava, etc. Do you think they are relevant in the present American context?

MA: Please don’t laugh, but I think it is. I have been reading some of the old poems in Tamil anthologies and there is a crystallization of lyric experience which is very powerful. Now, we consider exile to be a very twentieth century postcolonial experience but actually if we look at The Ramayana or The Mahabharata, the experience of exile was found there too. Look at Draupadi—she was in exile all her life and we sometimes have a habit of thinking that what we are going through is totally new. I was brought up in a home in Kerala where there was a lot of Sanskrit being used and there is something in that aesthetic that is very powerful. I don’t know what it really is, but in fact, I often refer to them. I have spoken on Ancient Indian Love Poetry in New York. To move to Meerabai. I have written a poem. It is an elegy to Alan Ginsberg and I imagine him having met Meerabai. So I have included some lines of Shyama Fatehally’s translation of Meerabai in my poem. I really love the lyric tradition in Indian poetry.

HL: You seem to be interested and engaged in some sort of activism—you referred to Safdar Hashmi and talked about the need of coalition forming and activism in America. So what are your views?

MA: I have written about this in an essay called “Poem out of Place.” When this first ever gathering of South Asians and Black people occurred in New York protesting against police brutality, I had started to write a poem about the death of Ahmed Diallo—so they took me to read it. I read out the poem on the street on a flatbed truck with a microphone in my hand and all the time police helicopters were hovering above. I had never done this before. Let me clarify. I do think about myself as a very private poet. I don’t feel that there are certain things that someone can say or that one should write about. I am very clear about that. But if something touches me then I have to write about it. So I’d never say to another poet, why
haven’t you written about this? It just does not work that way. It would just produce terrible art. You can write an essay, you can make a political statement, go on a dharna – do all sorts of things, but I think the subject of the poem has to call you in some sort of way and I have this long poem on Ahmed Diallo. At first, for a long time, I thought that I would not write about it as so many people had already done so. But then I thought, here was a young man, almost the age of my son, being shot at a doorway forty-one times. He was also from Africa and this was very touching to me. He had come to America in search of a better life. So I wrote the long poem and read it on this truck. You see, I don’t attach labels to myself and just write on whatever touches me.

SM: *Meena, thank you very much for all the time you have spared for us and for such a warm interview. Could you please read out a few lines from one of your recent poems.*

MA: *Sure. This is one of the three poems I mentioned to you earlier. I wrote it in New York after the September 11 episode (September 13-18th to be precise) and it has been published along with others in a series called “Lyric in a Time of Violence.” It is called “Aftermath.”*

There is an uncommon light in the sky
Pale petals are scored into stone.

I want to write of the linden tree
That stoops at the edge of the river

But its leaves are filled with insects
With wings the color of dry blood.

At the far side of the river Hudson
By the southern tip of our island

A mountain soars, a torrent of sentences
Syllables of flame stitch the rubble

An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms
Sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky.

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