

Portrayal of Motherhood in Meena Alexander's Poetry

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Abstract

The feminist consciousness of Meena Alexander is typical Indian and has its indigenous origin rooted in the oppression of women. The women has two extremely opposite images either as 'devi' the incarnation of virtue, devoid of all emotions and deprived of sexual and family relations like Sita and Savitri or the 'demonic', the villain, the monster full of all evils, allowing no humanity for herself. The awareness of the repression of the self and oppression of women in patriarchal society makes Alexander to ask in her autobiography *Fault Lines*, If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me? Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life? God, why teach me to write? So in order to subvert the traps of male domination, the poet reclaims the matrilineal tradition of India and celebrates it through her poems. Poet longs for gender free existence of women; however it is the 'utopian' desire. Still her poems encourage the concept of new woman aware of her own 'self'. She tries to negotiate the barrier of gender and the preserves matrilineal connection as a medium of establishing her new feminist identity by speaking about her matrilineal bloodline.

KEYWORDS: Matrilineal tradition, patriarchy, feminism, motherhood, gender

Julia Kristeva, in her *Desire in Language* describes a mother-centred realm of expression as the semiotic opposed to the symbolic law of the father. Kristeva rejects the psychoanalytic theorizing of motherhood as the model for psychic health. She observes, "A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh". For her experience of giving birth "wounds but increases" resulting in "the calm of another life, the life that other who wends his way while I remain henceforth like framework" (Kristeva178). Keeping in line with these radical feminists, Meena Alexander describes the relationship between mother and child ironically, "Before that script was set the child was born / but by that script the woman is torn" ('Text from the Middle Earth' IRMN29).

The lives of women have been controlled and manipulated by patriarchy in all cultures, all nations and all ages by setting various norms, values, roles of gender perception and idealism to 'make a woman'. Then the motherhood also becomes kind of imposition as Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*, "Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control This glorious motherhood imposed on women conditions her entire life" (Rich45).

Though childbirth and reproduction has been considered as reason of women's exploitation, Alexander's poetry captures the pangs of waiting motherhood, the joy of being pregnant and a perfect female experience of a body cupping a body and introduces the fourth generation in her poetry. In an interview with Ayisha Abraham, Alexander said

that giving birth and taking care of young children had allowed her to think back through to her mother. In addition, it had allowed her to see the female condition more richly (Alexander25). She is happy on her motherhood because it is not forced one but she had the privilege of making a choice to have or not to have children. With the birth of children, she entered another world where she could not achieve the silence and space easily. Torn between the responsibilities of motherhood and the earnest desire to write poetry, she experiences, “it emotionally a great struggle to try to put these two things together” (Govindasamy 94) but still she is happy because domesticity has deeply enriched and nourished her writing.

In **The Bird's Bright Ring**, the poet figures mother as the source and origin of the feminine voice to be heard. She is always close to the mother as a source of good, the omnipotent and generous dispenser of love, nourishment, and plenitude. Mother has been depicted as the symbol of creativity and production, “The mother is harvest” (24). Motherhood has been considered as a protective feminine principle. The Goddesses are worshiped as mothers.

Shulamith Firestone, an American radical feminist, based women's oppression on her capacity of reproduction itself and saw no answer to the problem until artificial childbearing was technologically a possibility. However, in Alexander's poetry, mother is not mere the feminine, loving and nurturing principle. She presents mother as Durga, and Kali, the fierce female goddesses, with their all destructive power. The mother figure in the form of Kali, Durga, and Draupadi represents fierceness, strength, as well as wisdom. In the poem 'Her mageless Face' (WP30), the two female figures of the Mother and the Sister fuse with Goddess Durga who can provide escape from salt of grief. The celebration of matrilineage is the significant aspect of Alexander's cultural bond with the land of origin as Diaspora poet. Her poetry focuses the new woman centered lineage of thought, writing, and history different from a patriarchal tradition and so she presents the mother as a powerful figure who leads us to golden future.

In the poem 'Dream Poem' (SR) poet speaks about the mother daughter relationship, which is based on the Indian cultural roots and drawn from the stereotyped women restricted by the silence, patience, and acceptance of social and patriarchal realities. The depiction of mother can be seen as the challenge to the power of father constituted by patriarchy. The poet's self is linked to the voice of mother who is ruled by the laws of father, “Each woman has a daughter / touched in a mirror / there is ash at the edge of disaster” (SR 13). Sudha Rai sees the celebration of matrilineage through motherdaughter relationship as “rebellious movements working against any monologic ideological moorings” (Rai 178).

The mother-daughter relationship has been influenced by new feminist awareness, speech, choice, and direction. The poet projects mother in poetry to exhibit the consciousness to mother's oppression of ages and to challenge power of father. The narrator of 'Blood Line' (RaB) speaks about continuity and change, the older generation and the new one and how she serves as the bridge in between. The poem is written for poet's daughter Svati Mariam who is compared with rain on the tamarind. She indicates her carefree and engendered being and belonging to new generation. She belongs to next generation and she stands at the opposite pole from the last generation symbolized by 'burnt grass'. The daughter is the representative of new female being which is projected

onto a future society. She marks the destruction of old, male centred myths and paradigms of social experience.

The new generation woman (child) will be never like woman of past generation and will not be burdened under female body, never be suppressed and burdened by the femininity and suppressed feelings. The poet addresses her daughter to soar high and revolt against old customs in the poem 'Green Parasol'

Soar over the Bronx River
Set fire to old straw
light up the broken avenues of desire
Then be a girl like any other (RS 32)

Poet longs here for gender free existence of women, however it is the 'utopian' desire. Still her poems encourage the concept of new woman aware of her own 'self'. She tries to negotiate the barrier of gender and the preserves matrilineal connection as a medium of establishing her new

feminist identity. Speaking about her matrilineal bloodline, poet writes, "I was born out of my mother and out of her mother before her, and her mother, and her mother, and hers" (AlexanderFL 21).

Alexander's poetry is difficult and highly personal, ambitious, ambivalent and mystically uncertain poetry. Her autobiographical books give some helpful explanation of it. Her poetry focused on the past and mythicized the matrilineal heritage of Kerala. Her poems often allude to the feminist and nationalist concerns, the problems of exile and the present life contrasted with the past. The poetic personae and their experiences depicted in particular pattern emphasize

Alexander's concerns with exploitation and subjugation of women by patriarchal power. The grandmothers and other women depicted in her several poems have merged into one nameless woman who has no past. Her poetry has reflected distinctive voices of Indian women who are

rural, metropolitan, and migrant, or immigrant. The depiction of mother as challenge to the

power of father and celebration of mother-daughter relationship in her poetry is influenced by new feminist awareness. She has used motherhood metaphors and joy of being mother as a perfect feminine experience to weave new feminist perspective.

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