

The Rhetoric of Cultural Symbolism in Meena Alexander's *Quickly Changing River*

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Abstract:

The poet Meena Alexander has travelled widely through her life beginning from the age of five. This has given her a wide range of personal and cultural experiences. These experiences are converted as symbols and are used in the poems of Meena Alexander in the anthology *Quickly Changing River* published in the year 2008. The poet is also a recipient of the PEN Book Award for her anthology *Illiterate Heart* in the year 2002. This research paper concentrates on the technique of Meena Alexander, where she uses a variety of symbols to represent the culture of her motherland. The cultural symbol represent an aspect of the poet's culture and it is also used as a rhetoric to insist its impact on the life of the poet. Most of the times, the poet uses symbols from personal experiences like her mother, grandmother, etc., which stands as a powerful and meaning cultural symbols and rhetoric of the cultural symbols describes the depth and the bond the poet, Meena Alexander has with the motherland, though she has travelled to many places in her life. This research paper tries to study how Meena Alexander tries to employ the rhetoric of cultural symbolism in the anthology *Quickly Changing River* (2008).

Keywords: Meena Alexander, Rhetoric, Cultural Symbolism, *Quickly Changing River*, personal symbols of culture.

Introduction:

The poet Meena Alexander is a renowned Asian-American writer. She is very popular for the travels that she has made through the length and breadth of the planet. Beginning at the age of five, when she had to celebrate her birthday in the middle of the Indian Ocean, as she moves to Sudan in Africa with her father, she has travelled through her life. She has been a globe trotter and this has added the exquisite uniqueness to her style of diction in versification and novel writing. She has also written memoirs and prose pieces. Her autobiographical work, *Fault Lines*, is one of her best, that guides the readers to have an in-depth understanding of her writings, especially poetry.

Culture is the representation of any social structure. It is culture that actually builds a society. The people who follow the same cultural concepts that actually builds a society. The people who follow the same cultural concepts fall into the same category or group. Though each culture around the world is quite different and rich, at some or the other the inferences that point these cultural representations make at last merge to be archetypes.

There are so many culturalists around the world, and each culture celebrates its own culturalists. It is because these culturalists are the ones who take their home culture through symbols to the world. Culture and human beings together create culture. The simple logic behind why is so unique and different from each other is, every culture is space specific and not person specific.

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure but the state ought not to be considered nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked

on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all arts; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. (Reflections 105-106)

The culture that is followed in Africa cannot be followed by the people of Europe. It is absolutely not because of the religion, caste, colour, race or the characteristics of the natives. But it is because of the place and the climatic conditions, to which every culture is developed by the native people, to accustom to the climate and place. The people who visit the place are also expected to that particular culture because often climatic conditions that prevail, which is completely different from their hometown.

For instance, some countries people wear parda because the climate is very hot and to protect their skin from the hot sun, the women are expected to wear this kind of a dress; whereas some other countries people have sun bathe in the sea shore, because of the lack of sunlight, which in turn leads to vitamin deficiency.

So, one cannot find fault with any of these developed customs and tradition, but understand the hidden facts behind every single tradition that every culture has developed through the course of time and experience. The very popular culturalist Raymond Williams talks about this in his book, as,

The idea of culture would be simpler if it had been a response to industrialism alone, but it was also, quite evidently, a response to the new political and social developments, to Democracy. Again, in relation to this, it is a complex and radical response to the new problems of social class. Further, while these responses define bearings, in a given external area that was surveyed, there is also, in the formation of the meanings of culture, an evident reference back to an area of personal and apparently private experience, which was notably to affect the meaning and practice of art. These are the first stages of the formulation of the idea of culture, but its historical development is at least as important. (Culture and Society, xvi)

Here, it must also be noted that every cultural development is based on the experiences of the flora and fauna and also the human beings that inherit the place. The same is applicable to the great Indian culture too. It is also a land of multiculturalism. The world today has turned it looks towards India because of the multicultural aspect that fascinates everyone around India.

There are a number of writers, who concentrate on the culture of their land and Indian writers are quite rich in it. Every writer or even every human being wants to showcase their culture to the world and say about their rich heritage and tradition.

Indians from their regional or linguistic background become ethno-culturalists most of the time. For instance, the people belonging to a particular linguistic culture claim that their tradition and ethnicity are quite richer than their counterparts. But this ideology might not be accepted by the people of the other cultures. This is base for all the internal conflicts that arise among the regional locals.

The only thing that everyone should understand is every culture is quite unique different from the others and all must respect the individual traditions and culture.

The works of Meena Alexander are widely appreciated for her cultural symbols and transcriptions. The writer, Meena Alexander was born in India, but to her favour of writing, she has widely travelled throughout the world visiting various countries, for academic and personal reasons. The entire childhood of Meena Alexander was caught between migration from one place to other, due to her father's profession, which required the whole family to move from one country to another. She had to spend six months in India and six months in Sudan

She has a number of works to her credit. The anthologies include *Stone roots* (1980), *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), *The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts* (1989), *Night-Scene: The Garden* (1992), *River and Bridge* (1996), *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004), *Quickly Changing River* (2008), *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013), and *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018).

The anthology of Meena Alexander, *Quickly Changing River* (2008) is chosen for this research paper. There are a number of symbols that the poet uses in the poems. But the main focus of this paper is on few of the cultural symbols through which the cultural aspects are brought out by the poet.

The Rhetoric of Cultural Symbolism in the select anthology:

The mother daughter relationship is a bondage of love and sacrifice. It is through this relationship that the culture is transferred from one generation to another. In the poem, “Dark Door”, she says,

Her eyes were burnt holes for the sun to shine through.

I do not like to say I.

She

Not I, not I! (QCR, 41)

The figure of the mother is recollected in these lines. The mother might undergo a lot of sufferings and difficulties in her life. But she would hide it from her daughter, so that the daughter is not affected by those problems. This noble quality of the mother also is transferred to the daughter as she grows up. The mother is seeing the daughter, when she grows up to be a mother. It is the mother who lives through the good qualities of the child.

I held on to the kitchen door,

Amma! I cried, no sounds came out of my mouth,

I want to kneel inside your red sari,

Let the pleats swallow me. (QCR, 42)

When she grows up and life presses her with difficult situations, she remembers her mother. The mother has taken care of her as a small girl without allowing anything to harm her. The mother has embraced so safely in her sari, that she was not exposed to any difficulties in life. So, even when she has grown up into a woman, when she faces problems, she yearns to feel the love and warmth of her mother. The dress of the mother, red sari is an important symbol, that is a symbol sacredness and gives the protection that a girl requires. The warmth of the mother’s red sari is incomparable to anything else in the world. The density of the sari is so thick, that the pleats would swallow her, when she was a child. This is a very important symbol that brings out the relationship between the mother and daughter, no matter the age or place.

In the poem, “Food for my Mother, One April Night”, she says the way she has cooked for her mother when she was a child.

Burst morsels of light.

Under a stone arch

On white cloth, set cold figs, hot shrimps -

O fragrant night!

Outside the cook’s hut

A stone, a sieve,

Butterflies in flight. (QCR,16)

It is the duty of the mother to cook the food for all the members of the family. For a change she cooks for her mother with the things that she gets. She does not have a proper stove to cook. She a stone arch, under which she gathers sticks and figs and makes fire with flint stones. The morsels of rice are being burnt and the aromas surrounds. She prepares all this at the night where the place is filled with natural beauty and the butterflies go around the mother and the daughter. The mother is happy because her daughter has taken so much of effort on an April night to prepare food for her.

The poet goes back to the memories of her grandmother from her mother in the poem “What Ayah Says”,

A pebble streaked with jet,

Ayah says that when children

Swallow bits of bone,
Buttons, stones, they drop right out.
I wonder if the pebble will. (QCR, 39)

Her grandmother tells that the children would digest anything that they swallow and come out of their stomach. The poet wonders how a pebble can be digested in the stomach. By saying this, the grandmother is symbolically telling the children that they should be ready to face the ups and downs of life, and also the problems or difficulties of life would vanish in a short span of time. The grandmother is having her own way to come out of the difficulties in life and she gets rid of her tooth ache by chewing cloves in a natural way. "Chewing hard on her clove. Ayah's back tooth hurts./ She chews cloves to keep the hurt from spilling." (QCR, 40)

The night owl cries so bright,
It perches in the leaves of the jackfruit tree.
/ /
If a jackfruit drops on your head
You will go to sleep, ayah said. (QCR, 40)

The grandmother also terrifies the small girl saying that she should not go out during the night time. It is a way protecting the girl. Instead of explaining to her about the problems and the anticipated incidents that may or may not happen, the grandmother just frightens the girl by saying that the night owl would drop the jackfruit on her head if she goes out.

In the "Song of the Red Earth", again the cultural restrictions are imposed on the girl by the society. The means of communicating the cultural regulations of the society to the girl child is the members of the family, especially the women of the family. The mother and grandmother, instead of being the support to a girl, just ensure she is safe through her childhood and gets her married to a man, before she could talk for herself. Neither the mother or the grandmother supports the dreams of the girl child and help her to achieve it. It is because, they were also brought up in the same way by their older generations.

The child parts her lips to speak
And the sun is smeared with birth muck.
She loiters in a theater of cruelty,
Spoils of sense, ruin of syllables, (QCR, 43)

The girl is not allowed to speak in front of the elders of the house, and strangers. She has to practice humility and obedience. The poet calls the world as a theatre of cruelty, because the girl children cannot move with freedom. They are not treated and respected as human beings, who have feelings too. But they are treated as objects who have been enslaved eternally the male dominated society. The only target in a girl's life is to get a married as soon as possible. When she marries and goes to the new house of the in-laws, she is not given due respect. She is expected to do all the work of the house like a servant and serve all the people at home without expecting anything in return.

Decade later the woman writes:
I have no real home
And what is left of my childhood
Is fit to be carted away,
Remains of the dawn (QCR, 44)

This is the influence of culture upon the girl who is forced to move from one house to another. Her life is an agreement to adjustments with others, especially the husband and the in-laws. That's why the woman, after marriage, when looks back at life, feels she has no permanent house. She is like an object that belongs to

someone, either the father or the husband and is under their care throughout life. Her childhood also does not have any good memories just like her womanhood. She now thinks the real purpose of life, and is there any.

The dress that is worn is another important and major cultural symbol. The girl children are brought up with such strict discipline and conditioning that the dress has to be a solemn and dignified one. In the poem, "Neela Marya", the poet recollects the memories as a child, how she was suppressed even in wearing a dress. "When the sun shines, you can see my legs./ My legs are solid flesh amma says,/ So, the sun can't shine through." (QCR, 37) According to the mother, it is the dress that protects the girl from the surroundings. The mother is always concerned about the way she dresses herself up. Even when she tears her dress while playing, her mother immediately buys her new petticoats. "I tear it with a guava branch./ I say, "Look amma, the tree did it!"/ But she always gets me new petticoats." (QCR, 37)

The mother feels the dress is the ring of safety around her daughter. But the small girl feels, that she is not given any freedom and is shackled by the mother in the name of protection.

Once I came in torn and wet,
The white petticoat between my knees.
I wanted to cry Jesus Lord turn me hard and cold,
A pebble with dirt on it,
That way no one will see through me. (QCR, 38)

One fine day after playing, she comes to her mother. Her mother is angry because her dress is wet and torn. This makes her to be frustrated about her life and she prays that she could have been a pebble, so no one will scold when she falls in the muddy water to play, and she would not be transparent when she wears the petticoat. She can live her love of freedom and happiness.

Conclusion:

There are a number of symbols that represent culture in the works of Meena Alexander. This research paper takes into account only the relationship between the mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, the state of a woman who feels unhoused and the importance of the dress of a girl in a society. All the areas of life are culturally entangled and the most implicit reflect is on the lives and dreams of a woman beginning from the child she was. The whole idea of wearing a decent and long dress is contradicted by the poet. She is not against the idea of wearing the culturally fit dress. But her question is, to please whom are the small children forced to wear those dresses? The answer according to the poet is, it is for the sake of oneself, one is living. But in the name of culture the various impositions of culture and tradition, the women of the society are being suppressed and their dreams in their lives are shattered. The Poet, Meena Alexander very strongly repeats it in so many ways that culture is a place if the past to dwell and not place to bury the future, of the girl child and the woman, in the name of tradition and culture.

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