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Rites Of Sense

By Meena Alexander

About the poet

Meena Alexander, (born February 17, 1951, Allahabad, India—died November 21, 2018, New York, New York, U.S.), Indian poet and teacher whose works reflect her multicultural life in India, Sudan, and the United States.

Educated at the University of Khartoum in Sudan (B.A., 1969) and at the University of Nottingham in England (Ph.D., 1973), Alexander held a number of teaching positions in India, France, and elsewhere. She lived in the United States from 1979 and continued to teach while writing poetry.

Alexander's collections of poetry include *Atmospheric Embroidery* (TriQuarterly Books, 2018), *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (TriQuarterly Books, 2013), *Quickly Changing River* (TriQuarterly Books, 2008), *Raw Silk* (2004), and *Illiterate Heart* (2002), the winner of a 2002 PEN Open Book Award. Her ninth collection, *In Praise of Fragments*, was published posthumously by Nightboat Books in February 2020. Her work has been widely anthologized and translated into several languages including Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, French, German and Swedish. Even her very first published poems were acts of translation: written as a teenager in English, they were published in a Sudanese newspaper translated into Arabic. Her poems have also been set to music, most recently "Acqua Alta" by the Swedish composer Jan Sandstrom.



SUMMARY OF THE POEM

"Rites of Sense" is a poem by Meena Alexander that explores the themes of identity and displacement. The poem is divided into three sections, each of which represents a different aspect of the speaker's experience.

In the first section, the speaker reflects on her childhood in India, where she was surrounded by the sights and sounds of her homeland. She remembers the "deep resonance" of her mother's voice and the "smell of jasmine and burnt sugar" that filled the air. However, the speaker also feels a sense of displacement, as she is aware that her identity as an Indian woman is being erased by the forces of colonialism and globalization.

In the second section, the speaker reflects on her experience of moving to America, where she encounters a different set of sensory experiences. She describes the "cement world" of New York City and the "hot subway cars" that fill the air with the smell of "burnt grease and urine." The speaker feels a sense of disorientation and isolation as she struggles to find her place in this new world.

In the final section, the speaker reflects on her efforts to create a new sense of identity that incorporates both her Indian and American experiences. She embraces her hybrid identity and sees it as a source of strength and resilience. She also acknowledges the importance of language and the role it plays in shaping our sense of self.

Overall, "Rites of Sense" is a powerful exploration of the complexities of identity and the ways in which our sensory experiences shape our sense of self. Through her evocative language and vivid imagery, Meena Alexander invites the reader to join her on a journey of self-discovery and transformation.

Various Themes Explored in the poem

MIGRATION AND MEMORY

Meena Alexander's book of poems, "Rites of Sensation," has a strong focus on memory because many of the poems in it refer to the poet's childhood recollections of India as well as her experiences with exile and migration. The poems explore how memory affects our perception of ourselves and the value we give to our surroundings. Many of Alexander's poetry discuss her relationship with her cultural heritage through childhood memories. For instance, the author of the poem "Himalayan" recounts playing in the Himalayan foothills and considers how this environment affected her sense of self.

In "The Inheritance," she focuses on the lessons she learned from her mother and grandmother and how these memories have influenced how she sees herself and her place in the world. The poems also explore memory problems and how memory can be faulty or incomplete. For instance, the poet emphasises the challenge of remembering her childhood memories with her father, who has now passed away, in "Splitting the Mango." The poem captures the sense of loss and decay that comes with passing time.

In the book, the idea of memory and the theme of identity are intertwined. Alexander explores her memories of India and her experiences of displacement in order to make a point about how our experiences shape our sense of ourselves and how we interact with others. In the end, the theme of memory serves as a vital linking thread throughout "Rites of Sense," binding the poems together and giving the anthology structure.

The mother-daughter relationship is metaphorically compared to the connection between the root and its branches by the poet. She recognises her mother as the source of her existence by using this metaphor. The mother-daughter connection is the poem's next main theme. She affirms a strong sense of personal history while documenting the changes brought on by migration.

Although she acknowledges her father in the poem, the matrilineal connection is much stronger. She establishes a female continuity through which she views her own life by following the line of female predecessors, in this case her mother. Her arrival offers a chance to regain a sense of wholeness. The poet, who had struggled with her identity and felt alienated, felt complete when she was with her mother. When she is able to experience her femininity as defined by her connection to her female ancestors, in this case her mother, such reconnection takes place. The poet interprets the peace of returning home as the beginning of the conclusion of her search. As a woman and poet, she absolutely needs this place. The poet emerges from her awareness, which was torn between her past experiences and the present. The ongoing dislocation is frequently described in poetry. The poem's primary theme is the relationship between the poetess and her mother. The poetess learns that her mother is about to pass away and might not have much longer. The poetess spent a considerable amount of time apart from her mother after getting married. She rushes to meet her after hearing about her and discovers her mother on a mat, tired, at twilight (neither day nor night). The poetess is apparently coming to terms with a painful truth, as suggested by the title "Rites of Sense." Rites are situations or experiences that we experience in order to have a better understanding of. The poetess remembers her early memories after realising her mother's predicament and accepting the fact that she is not very different from her mother. After viewing her mother's condition, she is afraid and does not want her to pass away. The poem expresses on a number of levels the agony of being apart from her mother. Since she cannot imagine her mother passing away, she does not even want to discuss death. She feels estranged and is going through an identity crisis, which she has also experienced, but the poet was able to feel complete while she was with her mother.

➤ Impact of migration in ones life

Migration is the term used to describe the voluntary or involuntary migration of people away from their native continent or country and towards other parts of the globe. The effects of migration on a person's life can be complicated and diverse, depending on a number of factors such the reason for leaving, the location, cultural and linguistic differences, and the particular circumstances of the person.

Following are some of the possible consequences of migration on an individual's life:

- 1) Cultural Identity: When people move, they may feel disoriented and lose their cultural identity, especially if they must adjust to a new environment and way of life. This can be challenging and cause emotions of confusion and alienation. People may mix elements of their own cultures with those from other cultures, which can result in a new and richer cultural identity.
- 2) Social Ties: Both within the migratory community and with the local populace, migration can result in the formation of new social networks and ties. This can help people fit in and offer social support in their new society.
- 3) Emotional Impact: Moving can be emotionally stressful, especially if the person feels lonely, discriminated against, or isolated. It may also result in a feeling of loss and a break with the friends and family who remain behind.
- 4) Economic Chances: Moving can open up financial opportunities, particularly if the person goes to a more developed nation with more alternatives for employment. As a result, their family will have more options and their financial situation will likely improve.

➤ Cultural awareness developed due to migration

Migration can be a useful tactic for enhancing cultural awareness. New cultures and ways of life are commonly introduced to people who move to another nation or region. Children may learn more about and have a greater understanding for different cultures, customs, and traditions as a result of this experience. Migration may also challenge people's preconceived notions and assumptions about other cultures. As people learn more about various cultural traditions, they may start to question their own cultural presumptions and viewpoints. This may lead to a more empathetic and sophisticated knowledge of diverse cultures. Migration can also encourage cross-cultural communication and interaction. When people from different cultural backgrounds get together, they can share ideas and benefit from one another's experiences.

This can support the elimination of preconceptions and the encouragement of respect and understanding between people. Yet, it is critical to emphasise that cultural awareness does not necessarily develop as a result of migration. It demands an eagerness to study and explore, as well as active participation in diverse cultures. However, immigrants may have challenges and limitations in their new environments, such as prejudice or marginalisation, which may restrict their capacity to completely integrate with other cultures.

Overall, migration can be a useful tool for raising cultural sensitivity; however, active engagement and a willingness to discover and consider different cultural perspectives are needed.

GENERATION CONFLICT

The poetess is older, more knowledgeable, educated, and more opinionated than her mother. The poetess has a modern outlook, in contrast to the mother's conventional one. But the poetess finds a connection between them. The mother has always accepted all of her sorrows and difficulties while remaining calm and silent. The poetess struggles to communicate her deep emotions and worries as she witnesses her mother's declining health. She is aware of how much the silence that is expected of women has permeated her as well. The poem portrays the close relationship between the mother and daughter. The poem has a sentimental tone. The poet discovers that she is a part of both traditional and contemporary culture. She is therefore intercultural. It demonstrates how two generations' perspectives differ. Her mother's ideal woman is very different from what she thinks, according to her mother. She's taught her to keep her mouth shut and not voice her ideas. She has instructed her in everything from cooking to sewing and other feminine tasks. Nonetheless, the poet also uses poetry as a vehicle for the expression of her views. Even now, the poet values everything her mother has done for her and credits her with giving her individuality. She feels constricted in a society that glorifies mothers who make sacrifices for their families.

Generation conflict in society

The term "generation conflict" describes the tensions and conflicts that can exist between different age groups or generations, especially when it comes to issues including values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Due to the fact that each new generation tends to have its own distinct experiences, perspectives, and objectives, generational conflict has been a recurrent occurrence throughout history. Conflicts between generations may result from this, especially if there is a large age gap or distinct cultural differences. Older generations might, for instance, berate younger generations for being overly dependent on technology, lacking in traditional values, or being overly politically correct.

On the other hand, younger generations may criticise older generations for being overly conservative, reluctant to change, or out of touch with contemporary issues. It is critical to understand that generational conflict is a normal and natural element of society's development and that each generation may learn a lot from the previous one. Generational disparities can be bridged and a more harmonious and inclusive society can be created through encouraging mutual respect, open communication, and a willingness to learn from one another. Generation occurs in the following fields in the day to day working of a human being:

- The use of technology is an area of potential conflict between different generations. Older generations may see excessive technology use as a negative influence on younger people, while younger generations may view it as essential to their daily lives.
- Different generations may have differing views on work ethic and career goals. For example, older generations may value traditional career paths and job security, while younger generations may prioritize flexibility and work-life balance.
- Generational differences can lead to disagreements in social and political views. For instance, younger generations may be more progressive and liberal in their views on issues such as gender and race equality, while older generations may have more conservative views.
- Different generations may have differing values and lifestyles. For example, younger generations may prioritize travel and experiences over material possessions, while older generations may prioritize stability and security.
- Different generations may have differing communication styles and preferences. For instance, younger generations may prefer to communicate through social media and text messages, while older generations may prefer face-to-face conversations or phone calls.

These are just a few examples of potential areas of conflict between different generations. It is important to recognize that each generation has its own unique experiences and perspectives, and that understanding and respecting these differences can help to bridge generational gaps and promote greater understanding and harmony.

FEMINISM

In this issue of Feminist Studies, Meena Alexander poses the question in her poem "Rites of Sense," which takes as its starting point recent studies of women and gender in India and the South Asian diaspora.

A piece of catharsis poetry written from a feminist standpoint is Rites of Reason. A cathartic poetry is one that uses language to help the poet organise disorganised mind and reestablish a sense of equilibrium and wholeness within themselves. It focuses on the turbulent mother-daughter connection Meena Alexander has with her mother. The poet's mother is portrayed in the poem as trying to teach her daughter to be a decent Indian woman who keeps her opinions to herself and doesn't fight for her rights. She thinks her daughter shouldn't be too forthright. The poem explores "internalised misogyny," which makes women believe they are less than males. Underestimating women, mistrusting women, and espousing gender bias in favour of men are some ways it can be seen. The poet depicts the harsh reality of women and how constricted she feels trapped in her mother's body by creating a portrait of her mother. It feels like a burden to make the sacrifices and show affection that women are expected to. The poet learns from her mother what behaviour the ideal woman in society is supposed to exhibit. The poem describes the struggle and gender prejudice that women in South Asian nations experience. The has a right to carry out her obligations as an ideal woman despite her personal disease.

Various aspects of feminism portrayed in the poem

1. Societal expectations from the women

In society, women have traditionally been expected to fulfil a variety of jobs and duties, such as:

- Caregiving: Women are expected to provide emotional, physical, and financial assistance for their families and children.
- Household duties: Women are expected to handle all domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry.
- Appearance: Women are frequently evaluated on the basis of their outward appearance, and they are expected to uphold particular standards of beauty.
- Gender roles: Women are expected to adhere to stereotypes of what it means to be a nurturing, sensitive, and meek person.
- Education and career: Women are expected to have a college degree, but they frequently encounter prejudice at work and are not given equal opportunities.
- Marriage and procreation: Notwithstanding their personal goals, women are frequently expected to get married and have kids.
- Modesty: In accordance with social norms, women are required to be modest and cover their bodies.

Women's opportunities may be restricted by these expectations, hence efforts are being undertaken to question and alter these social standards.

2. Evidences that states the existence of male dominance

- **The Gender Wage Gap:** Studies show that men and women earn differently across all professions and educational levels. This has been attributed to factors including occupational segregation and prejudice.
- **The "Glass Ceiling":** There is still a barrier preventing women from rising to the top of organisations since they are less likely to hold senior leadership roles.
- **Sexual Harassment and Assault:** A large percentage of women report experiencing sexual harassment or assault at some point in their lives, emphasising the power imbalance that male abusers often benefit from.
- **Political Representation:** Men continue to dominate positions of power in governments all across the world, and women remain underrepresented in politics.
- **Patriarchal Culture:** Patriarchal cultures, in which men are viewed as superior to women and traditional gender norms are ruthlessly enforced, are still deeply ingrained in many countries.

Overall, these indicators show that male supremacy endures in many areas of society despite significant efforts to address gender inequality.

3. The issue of gender inequality in South Asian nations, including India.

Gender inequality and the treatment of women in South Asian nations continue to be serious issues despite numerous improvements. Gender inequality is widespread, and women's rights are regularly disregarded. In these societies, women face a variety of forms of discrimination, including obstacles on the legal, social, and cultural fronts. They don't have the same opportunities for employment, healthcare, and education. Society still regards them as the main carers and mothers, which restricts female freedom and economic mobility. Examples of gender-based violence. Many women lack the tools and support they need to get out of dangerous situations. The gender gap is also evident in political participation, as women hold far fewer leadership positions than do men. A more equal society must be created, and women's participation in government is essential. The effectiveness of government initiatives and campaigns to advance women's rights and gender equality is still under question. Some of the efforts taken to achieve gender equality include women's empowerment initiatives, affirmative action, and the reservation of seats for women in political bodies. Hence, the government alone cannot address the problem of gender disparity and the status of women in South Asian nations. Collaborative action is required from people, civil society organisations, and the commercial sector to promote gender equality and empowerment.

HOMECOMING

At its most basic level, the theme of homecoming in "Rites of Sense" refers to the idea of returning home. For Alexander, this often means returning to her native India, where she spent her early childhood before moving to England and later to the United States. In poems such as "Return to India," Alexander reflects on the emotions that returning to her homeland evokes, including a sense of longing and nostalgia:

"I wept for my long-lost childhood For the streets that still spoke In my mother's tongue For the palm trees that waved me back To my own history"

In this poem, Alexander describes her sense of connection to her cultural roots and the memories that are associated with them. The idea of returning to one's roots is a common trope in diasporic literature, and it is a theme that Alexander returns to throughout "Rites of Sense."

However, Alexander's exploration of the theme of homecoming in "Rites of Sense" goes beyond simply returning to one's place of origin. She also grapples with the idea that home is not a fixed or stable concept, but rather something that is constantly in flux. In poems such as "City," she reflects on the ways in which different cities and landscapes can evoke a sense of belonging:

"The city is mine For a moment And then it is gone Leaving me with The scent of flowers And a longing for home"

In this poem, Alexander suggests that home is not tied to a specific place, but rather to a feeling of connection and belonging that can be evoked by different experiences and environments. The theme of transience is also evident in other poems in the collection, such as "Muse," in which Alexander describes the fleeting nature of inspiration and the ways in which it can disappear as quickly as it appears:

"The muse is a fickle thing She dances in the moonlight And then she's gone"

By exploring the idea of homecoming in these ways, Alexander offers a complex and nuanced view of what it means to come home. She suggests that home is not just a physical place, but also a cultural and emotional connection to one's roots and personal history. At the same time, she acknowledges that the concept of home is not fixed, but rather something that is constantly in flux, shaped by the experiences and environments that we encounter throughout our lives.

Another important aspect of Alexander's exploration of the theme of homecoming in "Rites of Sense" is the role that language and memory play in shaping our understanding of home. In poems such as "Translations," she reflects on the ways in which language can both connect and separate us from our cultural roots:

"I speak your language But it is not mine I stumble over the words And you laugh"

In this poem, Alexander highlights the ways in which language can be a source of both connection and disconnection, depending on how it is used and interpreted. She also explores the role that memory plays in shaping our understanding of home, as well as the ways in which memory can be both unreliable and transformative.

At the heart of the poem is the idea of homecoming, which is both a physical and emotional journey for the speaker. She returns to the land of her birth, but finds that it is a place that has changed in many ways. The speaker is acutely aware of the contrasts between her memories of India and the reality of the country as it is today. She describes the city of Delhi as "a wounded animal", a place that is "no longer the same" as it was when she left it.

Despite these changes, the speaker is drawn to the sights, sounds, and smells of India. She describes the "dark stones" of the city, the "heat-haze" that rises from the streets, and the "fierce light" of the sun. These sensory details create a vivid picture of the place and evoke the speaker's memories of her childhood. The speaker is also haunted by the memory of her father, who passed away while she was away from India. She describes him as a "shadow" that follows her everywhere she goes, a reminder of the loss and grief that she has experienced.

As the speaker moves through the streets of Delhi, she encounters a variety of people and experiences. She sees "women in saris, men in dhotis", and feels the weight of their gaze upon her. She is aware of the class divisions that exist in the country, the poverty that is so visible on the streets, and the vast gulf that separates the rich and the poor. She is also struck by the resilience and strength of the people she meets, who endure poverty, illness, and hardship with a quiet dignity.

The speaker's journey back to India is not just a physical one, but also an emotional one. She is grappling with questions of identity, belonging, and memory. She feels like an outsider in the country of her birth, a place that is both familiar and strange to her. She describes herself as a "lost child" who is searching for something that she cannot name. She longs for a connection to her roots, to a sense of place and belonging that she has never fully experienced.

At the same time, the speaker is aware of the limitations of her own memories and experiences. She recognizes that her perspective on India is shaped by her own privilege and status as an expatriate. She describes herself as a "tourist" who is both attracted to and repelled by the country she has returned to. She is aware of the danger of exoticizing or romanticizing India, of reducing it to a series of sensory impressions or cultural stereotypes.

Despite these challenges, the speaker remains determined to find a way to connect with India, to bridge the gap between her own experiences and those of the people she encounters. She is aware of the power of language to shape our perceptions of the world, and she uses it to create a sense of intimacy and connection with the people and places she encounters. She describes the "strange music" of Hindi, the "thick sweetness" of mangoes, and the "sharp tang" of spices. Through these descriptions, she creates a sense of shared experience, of connection to something that is both universal and specific to India.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker reflects on the complexity of her journey back to India. She acknowledges the pain and difficulty of returning to a place that is both familiar and sound.

CONCLUSION

In this poem about family shows the conflicts that come with being a writer's daughter. These poems reveal a complex, accreted identity for Alexander, a female poet, which causes tension inside her. The phrase "the daughter" by Alexander appears multiple times in different poems. Alexander's womanhood is fundamentally shaped by the family structure because it was there that she first learned how to behave like a woman. I've already said that her mother disapproved of her writing, but her father did. Even so, Alexander situates her mother's femaleness' boundaries and potential in the context of social expectation rather than bizarre, eccentric authority.. Although the daughterly position was also differentially defined in connection to the male and female parent, her role as a daughter to her parents was a set and definite identification. The descriptions of her mother pertain to the confinement of women in domestic settings. Her nightmares represent her painful experiences. Being a conservative, the mother was willing to delegate the tasks and even teach the daughter to suppress her own opinions. It demonstrates how women's voices are silenced in order to make them comply with the standards and expectations established by the patriarchal society. The poet illustrates how women are constrained in domestic settings in several of his examples. Her mother had to care for her father, who was always lying on the bed, despite the fact that she was frail, old, and weak. Her mother taught her a variety of activities, including how to cook, clean, sew, and perform other household duties. She was willing to

hand over her responsibilities and even educate the girl how to be quiet because she was a conservative. Instances like these show how patriarchal society silences women's voices and forces them to follow its rules, preventing them from accomplishing their goals.

It also discusses the necessity for women to speak up in order to empower themselves and pursue their aspirations despite what society dictates or expects of them.

The poem is about migration and recalls her mother's altruistic acts of kindness towards her when she was a child. The poem demonstrates how her mother gives her a feeling of identity and how close she is to her.

The poem also reflects the divergent viewpoints of the poet's mother. Although her mother has taught her how to act in accordance with society and to avoid expressing herself, she nevertheless expresses her opinions through her works.