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## **Confrontation of Violence with Counter-Violence in Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road***

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### **Abstract**

The concept of violence is an integral part of human psyche, an element of life. The need for violence and non-violence has always been a debatable issue. Both are complex and antithetical terms. In the present research paper, an attempt will be made to outline the manifestations of violence and counter-violence with special reference to Meena Alexander's novel, *Nampally Road*. The detailed study of the selected novel discloses the power and politics working against common people especially against women in India. But Alexander has challenged the very notion of the use of violence against common citizens of India by their counter-violence.

### **Keywords**

Counter-Violence; Identity; Meena Alexander; *Nampally Road*



The term violence is as complex as its various dimensions: physical, psychological, sexual, economic, social, cultural, political and ethnic. Earlier the term violence has been defined including any forcible action intended to kill or hurt physically as *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines violence, “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something” (Violence). But with the passage of time, this traditional definition of violence has been challenged through conferring new dimensions by different thinkers and critics. German-American political theorist, Hannah Arendt in her book *On Violence* while reading Frantz Fanon’s notion of life as an unending contest explores “violence is an element of life” (69). Arendt’s assertion seems quite pertinent in the post-colonial nation where violence is manifested in many forms.

Further Walter Benjamin, literary critic, philosopher, social critic, translator, radio broadcaster and essayist, in an essay “Critique on Violence” puts forward “...violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical unless force is misused for unjust ends” (Benjamin 236-237). Benjamin has associated the rationality of the term with just and unjust ends. But further Benjamin himself has put the term in to complexity by saying what is just for one person is unjust for another one. But Hannah Arendt claims the rationality of using gun in self-defense as, Arendt writes, “To use reason when reason is used as a trap is not “rational”; just as to use a gun in self-defense is not “irrational”” (66).

Meena Alexander’s protagonist Mira in *Nampally Road* is questioning the same notions and the need of counter-violence during the period of civil unrest in 1970’s in India. Meena Alexander is one of the most significant Indian authors writing in English, although settled in New York but still feels herself concerned with the problems faced by people at her native land. She has written eight volumes of poetry, which 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) and *Quickly Changing River* (2008). Alexander has written two book of essays and poems, *The*

*Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996), and *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009), two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). *Fault Lines* is her autobiography and *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (1989) and *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979) are her critical books.

Meena Alexander's writings mainly deal with an individual's migration, uprootedness, loss of identity, violence, dislocation and relocation, and conditions of women in postcolonial nation states by giving a message, "that the question of race, ethnicity, gender and nationality are all arbitrary signs to be contested and revised, so that one can reconstruct oneself anew" (Singh, 393). Jaspal Kaur Singh in an article "Memory of Trauma in Meena Alexander's Texts" has interpreted Meena Alexander's texts as locus of reconstruction of a new being and these new beings are no longer meek and submissive individuals. Alexander claims "to bring strong Indian women characters to her texts" (Singh 393). Alexander's protagonists are not ready to accept the traditional age old roles assigned to them rather they believe in responding with counter-violence. Alexander's protagonists believe in Arendt's notion of use of gun in self-defense rather than following the ideals of non-violence.

Mira Kannadical, the protagonist of *Nampally Road* is a college teacher in Hyderabad who has returned to India after completing her studies in England for four years. She thinks there is no use in teaching imaginary stories and teaching Wordsworth is completely insignificant in India at the stake of ignoring other important social issues. Mira thinks "differently on the notions of memory, history and consciousness in her new, volatile environment" (Dias 3). Mira's search for a particular identity of her own takes a turn when she sees Rameeza Be in police custody raped by police officers. Rameeza Be is a Muslim woman who has gone to see the celebrated *Isak Katha* at Sagar Talkies with her husband. "Walking back to home of relatives, along the deserted road in Gowliguda, they fell prey to a horde of drunken policemen. Rameeza was gang

raped. Her husband had his brains beaten out. His body was recovered from a wall behind the police station” (*Nampally Road* 58).

Police officers are enough callous that they prefer birthday celebrations of the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and they do not have time to register the case against the rapists. Alexander has questioned the political system and democracy in India. Even after 30 years of independence during 1980’s in India, common people are still forced to live the lives of subjugation and subordination. But the agitated mob burns the police station. They challenge the violence with counter-violence. Alexander here is negating the use of non-violence preached by Mahatma Gandhi. Archana Hooda while writing about the novel *Nampally Road* in an article “Dislocated Self as Reflected in Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*” says, “If the protector creates fear in the hearts of millions then there can be no way to abandon that fear” (6). Alexander has used the image of fire in water, that if the protectors are creating fear in the minds of people, who can save them from the trepidation? K. John Wesley Sasikanth in his article “The Plight of Women in Postcolonial India as Portrayed in Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*” says “The suffering of Rameeza Be was the suffering of an entire nation and Mira’s mission in life was to seek a solution, give relief to millions of Rameezas in India” (140).

Geetanjali Gangoli has written about the custodial rape in her book *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India* and has discussed Mathura rape case in 1978, Rameeza Be’s rape case in 1979, Maya Tyagi’s rape case in 1980 which revealed the gruesome realities associated with power politics. Geetanjali Gangoli has discussed custodial rapes and writes about Rameeza’s rape case as,

Rameeza Bee belonged to a Muslim family of agricultural workers. She was married when she was 17 to a mason in Nandikkotur, Andhra Pradesh. During a trip with her husband, Ahmed Hussien to Hyderabad in April 1978, she and her husband were arrested by the police for ‘loitering’ when they were returning from a late night

show. The police demanded a fine. The husband went home to bring the money. During his absence, Rameeza Bee was raped by three police men. (80)

Alexander questions a vital concern of the realities associated with the independence of India and the status quo. The whole democratic set up is questioned. When Limca Gowda, the Chief Minister goes through Nampally road, people are physically assaulted to give way to the cars of the minister,

The orange sellers were scrabbling free, their banner torn and bloodied, running as hard as they could until the street resembled a ditch of water in which living creatures were immersed, struggling for their lives, their arms and legs damaged by the blows falling from the iron-tipped lathis. (*Nampally Road* 7)

The need of violence and non-violence has always been debatable issue in the context of welfare of humanity. Walter Benjamin has propounded the notion of just and unjust violence and Rene Girard has differentiated the use of “beneficial violence” and “harmful violence”. Girard very clearly states that both the categories of violence should not be mingled, “As long as purity and impurity remain distinct, even the worst pollution can be washed away; but once they are allowed to mingle, purification is no longer possible” (39). Further he has associated beneficial violence with good violence and harmful violence with bad violence.

A sweeper at the police station, Maitreyi, is the eye-witness of the rape. But she is not afraid of raising voice against the heinous crime, she said, “Listening to her voice my ears grew swollen, like wheat filled with water, afloat on a swamp. I felt my body stuck in its place. I could barely lift my hand to push back the strands of hair that were crowding into my eyes” (*Nampally Road* 88). Maitreyi assists Mira to help Rameeza at the police station. Mira and her boyfriend, Ramu, who is also a social worker helps Rameeza. Durgabai does everything for Rameeza at home to heal her physical and psychological pain caused by the trauma. It clearly shows that subalterns are speaking and their

voices are quite audible now. K. Suganthi in an article “Meena Alexander and *Nampally Road*” argues, “She boldly raises her voice against the centre for the marginalized. This shows that the subaltern also can speak and it shall surely be heard” (487). Alexander motivates the subversion of power relations and now it is the turn of the subjugated and marginalized to speak and raise voice against the age-old patterns used for their suppression.

Mira finds herself in confusion when she returns from England; she wants to do something for her native people. But she does not know what she can do for the betterment of native citizens. When she meets Ramu at Sona Niwas, she finds her purpose of life. When she has seen Rameeza raped at the police station, she becomes determined of her mission. K. Sasikanth, and John Wesley in an article “The Plight Women in Postcolonial India as Portrayed in Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*” write “Mira became half an Indian by returning to India and deciding to settle down permanently here. She became a full Indian when she understood that her mission in life was to serve India, her motherland” (140). Same is the case with Ramu, his mother once told him not to leave the free India and he is trying to make sense of his life at his native land and he too thinks there is need for certain changes for improvement in the chaotic conditions of turmoil.

As Jean Paul Sartre in the introduction of Frantz Fanon’s book *Wretched of the Earth* asserts “Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at length; it seeks to dehumanize them” (14). His assertion seems pertinent even in the context of postcolonial nations too. Physical, psychological, economic, political, cultural, social, ethnic and various other dimensions of violence are used to tyrannize and intimidate the marginalized and subjugated sections of the society. If Rameeza belonged to the upper class of society then the scenes would be quite different. First by being a woman and then by belonging to the lower stratum of social order, she finds herself more powerless.

But *Nampally Road* cannot be termed as an historical record as in an article “Of a ‘Voice’ and ‘Bodies’: A Postcolonial Critique of Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*”, Aparajita Nanda articulates “. . . it is symbolic one which, in its networking, makes use of Indian history, contemporary reality, myth, fiction, personal and family anecdotes that build up a literary space” (119). By depicting contemporary realities, Meena Alexander exposes the trauma faced by women in all forms of violence and its psychological and emotional manifestations. But still women are bold and enough courageous to challenge the injustices heaped upon them. While challenging the wrongs in the society female solidarity is very apparent, as Mira, Durgabai, Laura, Maitreyi and Raniamma all have one voice in opposition to the power politics and forces responsible for making their lives subdued and restrained. A Slovene philosopher and cultural critic, Slavoj Zizek’s views seem pertinent when he questioned the origin of violence, “this is what we should do today when we find ourselves bombard with mediatic images of violence. We need to “learn learn and learn” what causes this violence” (8). The reasons responsible for the basis of violence are needed to be understood to comprehend the complex phenomenon of violence. Violence in some situations is needed to counter with certain problems, as Hannah Arendt affirms Fredrick Engels’ views about violence that violence is required for social, economic and political stability, Engels defines violence as “the accelerator of economic development” (qtd. in Arendt 9).

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