

The Poet in the Public Sphere A Conversation with Meena Alexander

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The events of September 11 and the aftermath: military retaliation, racial profiling of immigrants and international students, as well as the antiwar organizing in New York City, suddenly brought a new layer of urgency and complexity to our thoughts about artistic creation and critical dissent. I had been exploring the postcolonial novel as a literary form engaged in social critique. Reading Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* in the months following the devastation made me reflect on the place of the lyric poem in the public sphere. What were the possibilities of this intensely private form to bear witness to history, to rely on the logic of images to press its point, free of the overarching frame of narrative?

It was against this background that the following conversations with Meena Alexander took place, the first at the cafeteria of the CUNY Graduate Center and the second at Alexander's home. We made written additions to the conversations after the initial meetings. Our informal, back-and-forth discussions helped us to reflect on the recent traumatic events in the public sphere. It seemed to me that there was a relationship between places and histories we were forced to confront. This is visible in Alexander's innovation of the lyric form, which grapples with multiple geographies and languages of migrancy and confronts the personal and public facets of dislocation and grief through the workings of memory.

Lopamudra Basu: Tell me about your use of lyric form. How are you fashioning it?

Meena Alexander: The lyric poem is a very important place for me. After the terrible events of September 11, I had been working on a prose book, which I put aside, because I needed the sharp fragility of the lyric.

It seems to me that the lyric poem is a place of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem you have to enter into a dream state. Yet at the same time, almost by virtue of that, disconnect; it becomes a very intense place to reflect on the world. Recently, I have completed three short poems related to what happened on September 11: one is called "Aftermath," another is called "Invisible City," and the third is called "Pitfire." I used couplets making twelve lines for each poem, and somehow the form helped me to crystallize and think through without

fear. And the question of fear is important, as these are poems that deal with traumatic events.

I have put aside the longish prose piece I was working on, a piece about childhood. After what has just happened in New York City I did not want to be swallowed up in the past, with so much molten and flowing all around, the world I love in turmoil. I need to bear witness to what is now.

The lyric poem allows me much better to catch the edginess of things, the sharp nervousity, the flaming, falling buildings. And I think I must work back from the pressure of the present into the past, for that is the only way I will reach into the real.

In all my work place is layered on place to make a palimpsest of sense. That is the kind of art I make. But the very indices of place have been altered by traumatic awareness.

LB: How can we reconcile the tragic reality of what we are faced with and the aesthetics of poetic composition?

MA: In the composition of poetry, something that is very difficult to face is brought within the purview of language, into a zone of images, and is crystallized. And that act of crystallizing the emotion through the image actually has its own peculiar grace, which frees one, if only momentarily, of the burden of the experience. This seems to be the great gift of poetry. It eases the burden of lived experience, if only very briefly, in a way that a piece of music might. So, the lyric does have this function, it makes for transport, but draws from the ore of bodily being. Unfortunately, the histories that we are part of are often brutal and violent. In making a poem, one mustn't turn one's face away, I feel that very strongly. I think the beauty has to exist within that history.

LB: With a traumatic event like this, does writing become more or less important than other forms of personal or collective action?

MA: Both—we flow into what breaks and burns around us. We march in the streets, we stand at the barricades, we break through barriers and pick up the pieces of broken glass strewn on the streets. We touch the bodies of our dead, the precious fragments of flesh. But then there comes the time to stand apart. To rejoin the rhythms of the inner life, to allow them to work their ceaseless change. In my case there came a period of very quick writing and jotting down of events.

But after writing there came a time of fearful fragmentation, being torn apart in so many directions: the fear here on this island, the condition of our lives, not knowing what could strike next, fire, racial profiling, pestilence—that bitty white powder filled with anthrax spores (a floor of the Graduate Center, since we are next door to the Empire State Building,

was shut down for a while). And on the other side of the globe in Afghanistan, the terrible bombardment, stones ground down, children starving, women in *burkhas* fleeing. Both are real, disjoined in space, they coexist in time, in a molten time.

Though sometimes I feel I just want to write about childhood, I sense now I cannot afford the luxury of writing about a world enclosed. Still, I still need to dig back. The personal past has to be knotted up in the present. I must carry it as a bundle, bear it as a migrant might a blanket tied up with all her worldly possessions. So in this way I feel very intimately the necessity of artistic work. It is what I am called to do. In a very simple way I have found my work. Or my work has found me.

LB: You have said you would walk down to Ground Zero.

MA: Yes, I kept walking down to Ground Zero, as close as I could get, making returns, a pilgrimage, the site a graveyard for thousands, the stench of burning flesh and wires.

On one trip down there as I walked past Liberty Street I was struck by the extreme youth of the soldier guarding the perimeter, a young lad freckled, fresh faced. Behind him was the shell of Tower Two, against which an ancient patriarch was being photographed. Small children screaming in delight at pigeons, a rescue worker, hands on his own throat, face sunk with tiredness, his gas mask at his hip.

About a year ago I had made a poem called “Rumours for an Immigrant” for an art show in Bordeaux and Fribourg that Hans-Ulrich Obrist was curating. The poem was published in *Arc en Rêve: Mutations Projects on the City*, with designs of Rem Koolhaas and others. My poem was set in Manhattan, on this island, in a plaza, a crowded street, and then in Central Park.

Now I made a darker, ghostlier companion for it, called simply “Invisible City.” Like “Aftermath,” it too is twelve lines, formed of six stanzas.

LB: So you are now speaking of how an artist responds to such events.

MA: Yes, events have a shock value on the psyche and we do respond as human beings. But art takes time, it needs to be distilled, it takes quiet, a pane of glass through which one looks even if the glass is shattered and one looks out onto a scene of devastation. One still needs the distance to look, to let the rhythms come, to make the poem.

I think there is a kind of mnemonic torsion necessary to map out a space lit by trauma. But what does it do to the richness and density of ordinary experience—might it be a curious way of maintaining it?

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LB: What part did your childhood travels between India and Africa play in this aesthetic mapping?

MA: As a child I lived at the borders of war. Moving back and forth across the Indian Ocean between Kerala on the west coast of India and Khartoum in the Sudan in North Africa. In Sudan there was a civil war raging. On the way to India we often stopped in Aden, in what is now Yemen.

There were British Tommies on the rocks, and Yemeni fighters hidden by the broken walls. More recently in India, in the last few years there has been the rise of a fascist Hindu movement, ethnic violence, and now, with Pakistan, the fear of war. This has been part of my personal history and has left a mark on my poetry and my prose. How can these violent versions of the real that cut into memory be translated into art?

Art in a time of trauma, a necessary translation, “Fragments of a vessel . . . to be glued together,” Walter Benjamin said. But what if the paste shows, the seams, the fractures? For us, here now at the edge of a city blown up at its southern tip, the work of art must use the frame of the real, translating a script almost illegible, a code of traumatic recovery.

In its rhythms the poem, the artwork, can incorporate scansion of the actual, the broken steps, the pauses, the blunt silences, the brutal explosions. So that what is pieced together is a work that exists as an object in the world but also, in its fearful consonance, its shimmering stretch, allows the world entry. I think of it as a recasting that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious.

LB: You have used the image of fault lines in your memoir. Is it useful now?

MA: In what I write, fault lines, cracks appear in the givenness of things, of languages, streets, marketplaces. It’s a world filled with migrants. And yes, suddenly that does seem closer, I think, for some people. Though for me it is just the way things are, multiple places, fluid selves. So many languages filled my head when I was a child: Malayalam, Hindi, English, French, Arabic. Now those borders are pressing in at the brink of this new century, in a time of war.

LB: Memory is a very important theme in your work. How does the lyric poem work with memory?

MA: The lyric poem is so tiny. It can be folded onto a bit of paper, put into a notebook, written on the backs of matchboxes. There is something about the portability of the lyric in a time of danger. For me, the lyric becomes the form par excellence in a time of crisis because it can be carried in memory. Also, it need not be bought and sold. So at least for a lit-

tle while it stands outside the buying and the selling, the shards of violation that are parts of our human world.

LB: In what ways is the lyric a transnational form? I really want to know if the lyric as you use it borrows from multiple poetic traditions.

MA: In Kerala as I was growing up as a child, there was always the presence of itinerant folk singers, who would go from house to house and recite or perform the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. There was also poetry that was recited from memory and in the Syrian Christian Church, services were recited in Malayalam or Syriac, parts of gorgeous poems, it seemed to me. I was raised very early with a sense of the oral power of poetry. Peasants in the fields and workers used oral poetry, revolutionary songs of violation and freedom. This is also a tradition which is very powerful for women who might not always have access to the script.

Then in Khartoum, where I also grew up, Arabic poetry was very important to me. My friends who were poets were breaking free of the classical forms and there was enormous excitement. But even earlier I had lived next door in Hai el Matar to the poet and scholar Abdullah el Tayib. I was a little girl but he would often recite Arabic poetry to me and it entered my consciousness so deeply. He was keen that I should really learn Arabic. The title poem “Illiterate Heart” of the new volume is about a woman who falls between languages, and has no script.

LB: You have said that poetry is crystallized knowledge. I am reminded of your poem “The Color of Home,” written in response to a violent event, Diallo’s death, and you read it at a public event, the rally of South Asians, “Desis for Diallo,” under conditions of very peculiar police surveillance.

MA: The police are not new to me. As a poet I came into consciousness during the Emergency in India. About the Diallo case, it was quite a special event. For a long time I thought I am not going to write a poem about this. Then it caught hold of me. And reading it there on the flatbed truck, as part of this march of protest and solidarity, it was special. A lot of people could not hear what I was saying. Yet it was important that it was a poem. So it was private speech, but it was not private in a sense that we normally think of it. It was speech that returned in a way to the world, whatever the world is. I called that poem “The Color of Home,” and it has come out in a journal.

I remember during the Emergency in India, in 1975 when civil liberties were taken away, I wrote a poem called “Prison Walls” and I sent it to *Democratic World*, published in Delhi. The magazine appeared, and there was a space where my poem should have been. It was censored, but there was that space. So that meant a lot to me. There was the blank space that

was exactly the same shape as my poem. It was a poem about prisoners being beaten. They were being beaten in the police station that was just across the wall from the office at the Central Institute of English where I worked.

LB: What have the events of September 11 done to language?

MA: We were bombarded by huge amounts of language, public language, sound bites and statements and visually the images of the two towers burning, and it was a terrible and devastating event. Then there is the language of hunting for terrorists. The reality of racial profiling and how it creates an aura of distrust around people like us. How one looks, how one can be at risk. For me one way of restoring the possibility of breath or thought is to write poetry, because it is like taking words and rinsing them clean.

I think for me writing a poem is like rinsing the language. In India, after you rinse, the clothes are hung out in a line in the sunlight. Perhaps presenting a poem in public space is like hanging it out in the sunlight because people can say what they want and do what they want with it.

Speaking of the outside and public space, there is an exhibit in February and March [2002] in the Deutsche Bank. Poets and Writers and a number of art institutions in the city are putting it together under the rubric “Time to Consider: Arts Respond to 9/11.” There are poems by several poets as well as work by visual artists. Two poems that I wrote, “Invisible City” and “Aftermath,” will be hung on a wall. People will come in and go out and just look, and I will come in and go out and just look. The idea of poems just being there as objects in the world, this interests me greatly. There is something material that is forced back on us. We seem to think that the poem is all spirit, but it’s not. It is material, it is part of this world, and to make a poem is labor.

When my first poems came out in Sudan, I wrote them in English or French, they were translated into Arabic, they were published in newspapers, and then they were just put up on the wall of the university, where there was a wall journal that Khalid el Mubarak had organized. And they were just there. I like the idea that poems can just be there. In America we are so used to these billboards and enormous advertisements, in the management of public space. Poetry should be there, and it should be there for us. In contemporary American poetry, there is a strain of poetry that just needs to live on the page. But there are also powerful movements of oral poetry of rap and public performances.

LB: How is poetry a negotiation between trauma and healing? How does your personal experience of trauma get layered or stitched together with

other traumatic and violent moments that you have witnessed or learned about?

MA: I was born after the Partition of India. So the violence of Partition was there in the memories of those who raised me, even though we are from the south of India. The trains that crossed the borders, filled with the dead. Women abducted, families forced into refugee camps. Also more recent events. There is a prose poem in *Illiterate Heart* called “Taxicab-wallah,” which is really a meditation on the events of 1984 in Delhi, and the massacres of Sikhs that occurred after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. These become part of the migrant memory of the *taxicabwallah* in New York City, so too the ghosts of Partition. There is a ghostly trace of histories and nightmares that we have barely awoken from. We hear echoes in what happens now.

I first went to Sudan on a boat with my mother in 1956, during the Suez Canal trouble. There were bombs. We arrived in Khartoum, and we were fine. But there was a very long genocidal civil war that was in process. We were at the edges of it but it did come very close from time to time in Khartoum. People we knew were tortured crossing the border, the southern Sudanese. There was tear gas being used on the streets and many other things. I am thinking particularly of when I was thirteen, I went with students on a march, about the Southern question, and two students, Babiker and Bedri, were shot. There was civil unrest.

When I moved back to India, there was the Emergency. My novel *Nampally Road* was written at that time. And now for us in New York City, there is this very complicated palimpsest of place. When you were reading this poem “Petroglyph,” you asked what is this Königsberg, and you said Königsberg is unknown to me, as is Istalif, as is Kandahar. They are all unknown to us, all names but how do these names come together for us in our heads?

In a way there is a poetics of dislocation that I am trying to figure out, to lay bare, if you wish. What does it mean to be deeply attached to place? Or to be torn away from a place, to feel at the edge, not quite at home? So where is home for us here, now in the twenty-first century? Can language work to make a home, a shelter? These are questions that will never leave me.

LB: How do memory and language fashion migrant lives?

MA: When you write something down, it is a way of saying, I am remembering. A poem, particularly a lyric poem, can be stored in memory, or perhaps a line or an image. Sometimes when I am writing, it is not just events in my life but other poems that enter into my memory, poems that

I have learned, lines from poems, even from poems in translation, that evoke and trigger associations. A sensorium of being. The question of memory is one that has always been with me. For people like us, who are immigrants, it has a particular kind of poignance, a particular kind of cadence, one might say. Our memories are what we pass on, they have to enter into a relationship with a very different world. And we have this extraordinary architecture of memory that is part of our psychic lives.

Notes

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