

'Writing a poem is itself an act of hope'



In the US there are indeed many streams of poetry, all the way from hip hop and rap and spoken word, to the kinds of poem that are prized in the academy. It does flourish here, even though there is no money in it, but perhaps that too is its strength. And there are fine contemporary poets in India, in English and in the Indian languages, and there is often a great vitality to poems I have read, powerful ways of marking the internal tremors that shape our lives.

How did your tryst with verse begin? Did you choose poetry or did it choose you? Can you describe the series of events from your life that led you to becoming a poet? When were you convinced that this is what you have to do?

Meena Alexander is undoubtedly one of the finest poets in the contemporary times. Her volumes of poetry include *Illiterate Heart* (winner of the PEN Open Book Award), *Raw Silk* and *Quickly Changing River*. She is Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies and teaches at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Excerpts from an interview:

Indian publishing space is witnessing a rising tide in fiction and prose but perhaps poetry is losing out at an equal pace in India. What are your views on the relevance of poetry today?

It was just something I loved doing ~ dancing words, the music of survival really. I cannot imagine now anything else I could possibly do, or indeed be.

How do you decide on the subjects of your poems? Are you melancholic or is it that melancholy makes your verses more passionate to read?

You ask about melancholy...perhaps there is nothing one can do about that. A fault of one's temperament. I have to be inspired, there has to be something, some grit in the oyster's shell. But by the same token I have to give the mind free space, to move in quietness, to let the words come if they will. Sometimes a poem takes me a very long time to write. I might write a draft and set it aside, for months, years, not quite getting the shape. Sometimes it comes more quickly. I remember Ayyappa Paniker saying 'Meena, the poem is waiting to be written.' Or Jayanta Mahapatra saying to me 'One has to have courage to sit for a long time in front of a blank sheet of paper.'

There is also a lot of 'Hope' between words in some of your verses, like when you say, "Now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever / To put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking." Tell us about your feelings on writing a melancholic poem and then a poem ending with a sense of hope? Are you personally affected by your poems?

Yes I am affected. Perhaps writing a poem is itself an act of hope. In other words, unless there were hope, however deeply hidden, how could one write, express the thoughts that have no other way to emerge? Is it possible that what you call

a melancholic poem might be impossible without a sense of hope? I do not think one can separate the two so clearly. Surely it is in darkness that the gold of the horizon is most clearly etched.

How difficult is it for a family person like you to fit into the shoes of a poet? Do you isolate yourself while writing or reading?

Well I must say it's not always so easy to write and be part of a living breathing family. Yes, I do try to make time for myself, but it's also out of the heart of those connections that our emotions spring and often times it's at home that I write, though I have the habit of going and sitting in a coffee shop or sitting alone in a writing studio I have rented, at the top of a stone church, five minutes walk from where we live. I write on buses, trains, planes. Somehow I love the motion. When my children were small I sometimes would wake up at 4 am to write. And they had to put up with a dreamy mother, who would seem to be thousands of miles away.

Tell our readers a little about your latest, *Atmospheric Embroidery*.

The poems were written over several years and in the course of much travel. But I actually put the book together last year, when I was in Shimla at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, where they had kindly invited me to spend some time writing. So, in my study overlooking the mountains, I was able to lay out pages, rework some poems and figure out a shape to the whole thing. Yes, the quiet and silence in the mountains was very important to me.

■ Saket Suman

