

The home and the world

We see the diasporic imagination at work: from native Kerala to 'Broadway and 113 Street'

In her latest poetry-collection, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, Indian-English poet Meena Alexander pushes the boundary of the 'home' and the 'world', celebrating, in the process, 'our common humanity'. The poems are 'vivid monuments to what we have lost and reminders of the enormity of what we have left to last'.

They capture the kaleidoscopic cameos of life's experience in a varied manner. The poem, 'Fragment, in praise of the book' is a tribute to the art of writing and lan-



Sachidananda Mohanty

guages of the world. It is also about the art of book-making: 'leaves from mango tree', books of 'bottle glass revised by the sea and 'book of singing grief' to single out a few from a rich tapestry.

The title poem, 'Atmospheric Embroi-

dery' is powerfully imagistic; eclectic and transcultural; it brings in a mélange of riparian habitats: the Nile, Missouri and-Mississippi: the line 'coast lines slit by lightning' could only be epiphanic.

In 'Studio', we see the act of creation in the presence of 'Sakshi', the witness, in near Upanishadic terms: 'No one would see her seeing I thought / without themselves being altered in some way.' On the other hand, 'Net Work' is intimately autobiographical, evocative of childhood memories intermingling with the present, past and the present almost in Blakean terms. We see the diasporic imagination at-work: from native Kerala to 'Broadway and 113 Street,' the desire forever is to 'swim to another shore,' the movement, relentless and insatiable.

Several sections punctuate the collection. 'Indian Ocean Blues', sporting an epi-

graph from Aime Cesaire, captures the cadences of the past and the present, brought by oceanic echoes. The

voyage becomes a rite of passage: 'Our boat is bound for Africa / They have goats and cows just like us / Also snakes that curl / under the frangipani tree'. The composition 'Tarawad' is magically Lawrentian, reminiscent of the iconic *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*: 'courtyards whose sun birds drew / glittering beaks across mulberry barks'.

Equally captivating are the 'Darfur Poems'. In 'Sand Music', a woman drags a cart filled with pots and pans / Pulling the sky behind her'. Likewise, 'Green Leaves of El Fasher' explores a woman's quest for identity and selfhood'. In the two Sarra Copia poems, we see the

persona's conversation with the past, just as the unforgettable poem 'Nirbhaya' reminds us of our collective shame when a



Atmospheric Embroidery



Meena Alexander

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young life gets snuffed out by urban savagery.

'Hyderabad Note Book' brings back memories of the 70s: In 'New Mysore Café' we see landscapes quietly transfigured: 'the café is gone, in its place is a Reebok Store'. Names and metaphors jostle for attention: Nampally Road, Golden Threshold and Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India...

The last poem in this section, 'No Rescue', questions the purpose of it all: 'You thought that by crossing all these seas / writing all these poems, something would happen / But nothing has happened, except that you have grown / older': Stasis and flux go together.

Meena Alexander's poems are deeply arresting. At their best, they are epiphanic; at other times, the inspiration flags, and the verse becomes abstruse.

On the whole, however, the poetic métier stands out. As Maxine Hong Kingston tells us: 'Her voice guides us far away and backs home. The reader sees her visions and remembers, and is uplifted.'

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