

Meena Alexander (born 1951) is an internationally acclaimed poet, scholar, and writer.^[1] Born in Allahabad, India, and raised in India and Sudan, Alexander lives and works in New York City, where she is Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and at the CUNY Graduate Center in the PhD program in English.^[2] She is the author of numerous collections of poetry, literary memoirs, essays, and works of fiction and literary criticism.

Biography

Meena Alexander was born into a Syrian Christian family from Kerala, South India.^[3] She lived in Allahabad and Kerala until she was almost five when her father's work—as a scientist for the Indian government—took the family to Khartoum in newly independent Sudan.^[4] She attended the Unity High School there and after graduating in 1964,^[5] when she was only thirteen, Alexander enrolled in Khartoum University, where she studied English and French literature. There she wrote her first poems, which were translated into Arabic and published in a local newspaper. After graduating with a BA Honors from Khartoum University in 1969, she moved to England and began doctoral study at Nottingham University. She earned a PhD in English in 1973—at the age of twenty-two—with a dissertation in Romantic literature that she would later develop and publish as *The Poetic Self*.^[4] She then moved to India and taught at several universities, including the University of Delhi and the University of Hyderabad.^[6] During the five years she lived in India she published her first three books of poetry: *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976), *I Root My Name* (1977), and *Without Place* (1978). In 1979 she was a visiting fellow at the University of Paris-Sorbonne. The following year she moved to New York City and became an assistant professor at Fordham University, where she remained until 1987 when she became an assistant professor in the English Department at Hunter College, the City University of New York (CUNY).^[4] Two years later she joined the graduate faculty of the PhD program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. In 1992 she was made full professor of English and Women's Studies. She was appointed Distinguished Professor of

English in 1999 and continues to teach in the PhD program at the Graduate Center and the MFA program at Hunter College. Over the years she has also taught poetry in the Writing Division in the School of the Arts at Columbia University.^[6] Since moving to New York, Alexander has been a prolific author, publishing six more volumes of poetry, two books of literary criticism, two books of lyric essays, two novels, and a memoir. She is married to the brother of journalist and author Joseph Lelyveld, and has two children.

Alexander is known for lyrical writing that deals with migration, its impact on the subjectivity of the writer, and the sometimes violent events that compel people to cross borders.^[7] Though confronting such stark and difficult issues, her writing is sensual, polyglot, and maintains a generous spirit.^[2] About her work, Maxine Hong Kingston has said: "Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted."^[2] Alexander has been influenced and mentored by the Indian poets Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Das, as well as the American poets Adrienne Rich and Galway Kinnell.

Among her best-known works are the volumes of poetry *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004).^[7] Her latest volume of poetry is *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2015).^[4] She has edited a volume of poems in the Everyman Series, *Indian Love Poems* (2005), and published a volume of essays and poems on the themes of migration and memory called *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (2006). In 1993 Alexander published her autobiographical memoir, *Fault Lines* (significantly revised in 2003 to incorporate new material).^[4] She has published two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991)—which was a *Village Voice* Literary Supplement Editor's Choice—and *Manhattan Music* (1997), and two academic studies, *The Poetic Self* (1979) and *Women in Romanticism* (1989). *Fault Lines* was chosen by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the best books of the year in 1993. *Illiterate Heart* won the 2002 PEN Open Book Award.^[7]

Her poems have been set to music. Impossible Grace was the lyric base of the First Al Quds Music Award, with music composed by Stefan Heckel and sung by baritone Christian von Oldenburg (First performed in Jerusalem). `Acqua Alta' was set to music by the composer Jan Sandstrom and performed by the Serikon Music Group and the Swedish Radio Choir (First performed in Stockholm)

Alexander has read at Poetry International (London), Struga Poetry Evenings, Poetry Africa, Calabash Festival, Harbor Front Festival, Sahitya Akademi (India) and other international gatherings.^[8] She has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Arts Council England, National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, National Council for Research on Women, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, Ledig-Rowohlt Foundation. She was in residence at the MacDowell Colony and has held the Martha Walsh Pulver residency for a poet at Yaddo. She has been a Visiting Fellow at the Sorbonne (Paris IV), Frances Wayland Collegium Lecturer at Brown University, Writer in Residence at the Center for American Culture Studies at Columbia University, University Grants Commission Fellow at Kerala University, and Writer in Residence at the National University of Singapore. In 1998 she was a Member of the Jury for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. She has served as an Elector, American Poets' Corner, at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York.^[8] She was the recipient of the 2009 Literary Excellence Award from the South Asian Literary Association (an organization allied to the Modern Languages Association) for contributions to American literature.^[9] In 2014, Meena Alexander was named a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, India.

Her book, Poetics of Dislocation, was published in 2009 by the University of Michigan Press as part of its Poets on Poetry Series. Also in 2009 Cambridge Scholars Publishing brought out an anthology of scholarship on her work titled Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander.

The poems in her book, "Birthplace with Buried Stones", "convey the fragmented experience of the traveler, for whom home is both nowhere and everywhere" [2]. Billy Collins writes of this book: "With one hand on the things and textures of the material world and the other reaching into the mysteries beyond us, Meena Alexander does what poetry does best, conveying us from the Known to the Unknown with grace and formal care."

Her most recent collection of poems, Atmospheric Embroidery (2015), evokes themes of migration, war, dislocation, conflict, love and divinity in lines of precise grace. Her poem 'Bright Passage' included in this book was featured on the wall of the Smithsonian for the 2014 exhibition 'Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Remake the Nation'.

Nampally Road

Haunting and lyrical, the novel Nampally Road vividly portrays contemporary India and one woman's struggle to piece together her past. At the heart of this novel, is the gang rape of Rameeza Be by the police. The towns people rise up and burn the police station. This novel reissued in 2013 by Orient Blackswan has a powerful resonance with the recent tragic events in Delhi. When it was first published in 1991 the novel was a Voice Literary Supplement Editor's Choice.

Published works

Poetry

- Stone Roots (New Delhi) (1980)
- House of a Thousand Doors (1988)
- The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts (Short Work Series) (1989)
- Night-Scene: The Garden (Short Work Series) (1992)
- River and Bridge (1995/ 1996)
- Illiterate Heart (2002)
- Raw Silk (2004)
- Quickly Changing River (2008)

- "Birthplace with Buried Stones" (2013)
- Atmospheric Embroidery (Hachette India) (2015)

Poetry and essays

- The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience (1996)
- Poetics of Dislocation (University of Michigan Press, 2009)

Autobiography

- Fault Lines (1993/new expanded edition 2003)

Novels

- Nampally Road (1991/2013)
- Manhattan Music (1997)

Criticism

- Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley (1989)
- The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism (1979)

Prefaces and introductory notes

- Foreword to Indian Love Poems (Everyman's Library/Knopf, 2005)
- 'Buried Voices': Preface to Cast Me Out If You Will!: Stories and Memoir Pieces by Lalithambika Antherjanam (New York: Feminist Press, 1998)
- 'Bodily Inventions: A Note on the Poems' Guest Poetry Editor to 'The Body' -- Special Issue of The Asian Pacific American Journal vol.5 no.1, spring/summer 1996
- 'Translating Violence' Foreword to Blood into Ink, Twentieth Century South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War, eds.

Miriam Cooke and Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (Boulder: Westview Press, Spring 1994)

- Introduction to Truth Tales : Stories by Contemporary Indian Women Writers (New York: Feminist Press, Fall 1990) Editors Choice of Publishers Weekly, 1990

Edited works

- Indian Love Poems (2005)

Further reading

- Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander. Eds. Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Ali, Zainab and Dharini Rashish. "Meena Alexander." In Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers. Ed. King-Kok Cheung. Honolulu, HI: U of Hawaii P, with UCLA Asian American Studies Center; 2000. 69-91.
- Maan, Ajit K. "Fault Lines." In Internarrative Identity. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999. 19-38.
- Nanda, Aparajita. "Of a 'Voice' and 'Bodies': A Postcolonial Critique of Meena Alexander's Nampally Road. In Bodies and Voices: the Force-Field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies. Ed. Merete Falck Borch, Eva Rask, And Bruce Clunies Ross. New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2008. 119-125.
- Poddar, Prem. "Questions of Location: A Conversation with Meena Alexander." HIMAL South Asia 14.1 (Jan. 2001). ([3]).
- Ponzanesi, Sandra. "The Shock of Arrival: Meena Alexander, Fault Lines." In Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 51-64.
- Pope, Jacquelyn. "Raw Silk by Meena Alexander." Harvard Review 28 (Spring 2005) ([4]).

- Shankar, Lavina Dhingra. "Postcolonial Diasporics 'Writing in Search of a Homeland': Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*, *Fault Lines*, and *The Shock of Arrival*." *LIT* 12 (2001): 285–312.
- Tabios, Eileen. "Gold Horizon: Interview with Meena Alexander." In *Black Lightning: Poetry in Progress*. Ed. Eileen Tabios. New York: Asian American Writers Workshop, 1998. 196–226.
- Young, Jeffrey. "Creating a Life through Literature." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (14 March 1997): B8.

Bibliographic listings (selected list)

- *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)
- *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)
- *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* (Oxford University Press, 1996)
- *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1995)
- *Women Writers in the United States: A Timeline of Literary, Cultural and Social History* (Oxford University Press, 1996)