

WRITER'S WORLD

Meena Alexander: Home is elsewhere

RUBANA HUQ

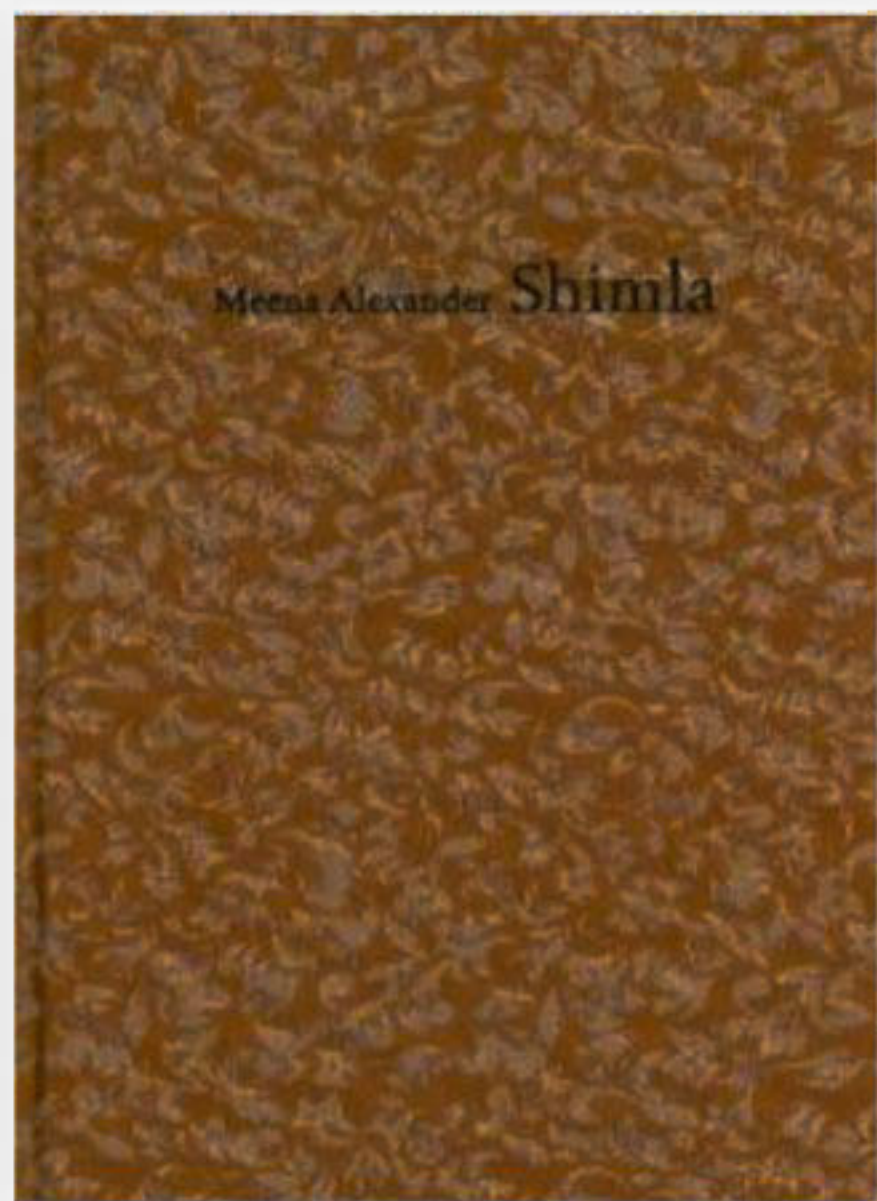
Glenn Horowitz Bookseller has just published *Shimla*, Meena Alexander's latest book of poems. It's an edition of fifteen pages, limited to 150 copies, signed by the poet out of which 125 are bound in red handmade wrappers and are string tied and tagged at USD 40.00 whereas the rest 25 are bound in patterned cloth and selling at USD 125.00. The visual experience is crucial. *Shimla* comes through beautifully through a frame of 6.25"x9.25". Set in Shimla and in the Viceregal Lodge, which is now known as Rashtrapati Nivas, the book is indeed a cycle of lyric poems which speak of the poet's longing for the summer



heaven of India, Shimla. Writers Workshop, a publishing entity from Kolkata (then Calcutta), published Meena Alexander's first book of verse. Two years later, she published her second from the same platform: *Poetry is place, Reach out and touch your fingernails, Your skin Weep, weep at sightless wings* (Without Place, 1978). This was Meena Alexander thirty-six years ago in Calcutta, just a newly published writer. Professor P.Lal of Writers Workshop, who she met in Hyderabad, published her first book, a single lengthy poem in 1976. She lived in India for five years, taught at several universities, including the University of Delhi and the University of Hyderabad, and during those five years she published her first book of poetry: *The Bird's Bright Ring*. That book of poems was published from Writers Workshop at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 700045, India; that book of verse was also hand-set in Times Roman typeface and printed on an Indian-made hand-operated machine by Chandra Shekhar Mondal at the Mondal Printing Works, Diamond Harbour, South 24 Parganas on paper manufactured in India. That book of verse was also hand-bound by Tulamiah Mohiuddin with handloom sari cloth woven and designed in India. Thirty-six years later, in 2012, Meena Alexander's *Shimla* has been published in New York from Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, and is set in Rilke types of the Nonpareil Typefoundry with the cover being designed

by Jerry Kelly. Born in Allahabad, India, raised in India and Sudan, Meena went to study in England at the age of eighteen. Right before she came to India, after graduating with a BA Honors from Khartoum University in 1969, she had earned a PhD in English in 1973 at the age of twenty-two with a dissertation in Romantic literature at Nottingham University. In 1980 following her visiting fellowship at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, she moved to New York City and has remained there till date. She is Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York and teaches in the MFA program at Hunter College and the Ph.D. Program at the Graduate Center. Meena's autobiography 'Fault Lines' (*Publishers Weekly's* Best Books of 1993, which was revised in 2003 to add new content) offers a clear vision of a woman trying to strip "free of the colonial burden" (page 74). She has eight volumes of poetry to her credit, including *Illiterate Heart* (2002), which won a 2002 PEN Open Book Award. As much as she speaks of migration and her diasporic sensitivities in her recent poems, such as "Late, There Was an Island", poems like "Triptych in a Time of War", deal with the aftermath of the traumatic events of September 11, 2001 as well. The Indian poets Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Das as well as the American poets Adrienne Rich and Galway Kinnell have influenced Meena Alexander, who has always written about migration and its impact on the writer. Among her best known works are the volumes of poetry, *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004). Her latest volume of poetry is *Quickly Changing River* (2008). 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). Her book of essays, *Poetics of Dislocation*, was published in 2009 by the University of Michigan Press as part of its Poets on Poetry Series. Today, in New York, Alexander is still all about memory, longing and nostalgia... *In the absence of reliable ghosts I made a aria, Coughing into emptiness, and it came A west wind from the plains with its arbitrary arsenal: Torn sails from the Ganga river. Bits of spurned silk, Strips of jute to be fashioned into lines, What word stake-sentence and make-believe, A lyric summoning. (Poems, uncollected)* In her apartment on 190th Street in North Manhattan, where I met her in August 2010, Meena Alexander was still a poet of melancholy and memory. Till date, she refers back to her early work with a certain degree of hesitation. In fact, none of her official biographies have any mention of her first two. Upon my insistence, she shared bits and pieces from her past... Her first collection of poems was written

in 1975 and published in 1976. Meena had sent the transcript to Professor Lal and he had gladly published her. Apparently, she had heard Professor Lal mentioning to his friends that Meena would be greatly appreciated at some point in her life. Meena calls her first book an "interesting experiment". Just back from England, Meena had joined the activists' platform along with the grandson of Gandhi. The first book, she states, remains precious for her and she fondly recollects having sent many copies of the book to all her relatives, not caring to know whether they had gone through her labour of love. It is the second book, *Without Place*, out of which she had not expected to meet a reader in Hyderabad who seemed to have been awe-struck by the content and style. She, however, continued speaking passionately spoke of her more recent works: *Quickly Changing River* (dedicated to her mother); *Raw Silk* which speaks of 9/11, Iraq and has letters to Gandhi; *House of a Thousand Doors* *Illiterate Heart* *River and Bridge* *Poetic of Dislocation*: collection of essays Today, Meena Alexander recollects her friendship with Meenakshi Mukherjee and Jayanta Mahapatra, both writers who wrote for Writers Workshop. Meena also mentions Kamala Das, her dear friend upon whose



demise she wrote an Op Ed on in *Biblio*. She also talks about her absolute passion for the poetry of Jibananda Das, with whom she shares the same longing and melancholy and whose date of birth is in close proximity to hers. Throughout the conversation, she refers to the angst of the South Asian poets and moves on to add that Jibananda's sensibility, his longing for an impossible existence combined with his love for the lateral world and his poetic landscape set against the backdrop of nature are what she remains attracted to the most. Therefore, in one of her recent book of poems, she has dedicated a whole poem to Jibananda Das's *Nine Swans*. Meena quotes her friend Jayanta

Mahapatra with whom she shares the same emotion of not minding sitting in front of a blank page for hours staring at drafts, amazed by the labor and intricacy the fabric of a poem offers. Till date, there is a calming amalgamation of history and memory in Meena Alexander. As much as she remembers an open terrace (Lady Dufferin's Terrace) from the South, as much as she remembers her bamboo grove and her suite 19 at the Viceregal Lodge in Shimla, as much as reminisces about the lichis and the Hanumans on Lady Dufferin's Terrace, she also hangs on to her Today that offers her fresh air from her very own Bryant Park and her desire for clinging on to the "memory of the place where Basho walked" (*Near Sendai*). While Meena indulges in her *Morning Ritual*, she still wonders about Basho and suddenly jolts back to reality to look at the "forked path to this moment" and ends: *Trees have no elsewhere. Leaves very green.* Meena Alexander seems to have been looking for a way to heal her heart ever since she first began to write poetry. In *House of a Thousand doors*, she watches a: "A poor forked thing", kneeling all her lifetime... *Imploing the household gods Who will not let her in.* In *Shimla*, she is no different when she imagines Lord Curzon's daughter whispering in the deodar leaves, unraveling her hair, writing to her "Dear Diary", sadly pining away for her lover: "I do not know who he is anymore" and then continues her quest: *"She needs Hanuman with his herb of healing But the clouds won't part."* Home to Meena Alexander is also an alien terrain. Meena, on Question of Home in www.poetry.org answers that her home was a separate space with a promise: *I turned five on the steamer as my mother and I traveled from Bombay to Port Sudan, to meet him (father). I still think that birthday on the waters of the Indian Ocean has marked me in ways utterly beyond my ken. It has left me with the sense that home is always a little bit beyond reach, a place both real and imagined, longed for, yet marked perpetually as an elsewhere, brightly lit, vanishing. I think of Mallarme who spoke of the image as an absente de tous bouquets. For me that is what home is. And our internal migrations become the music, wave after wave of it, that give it a fragile and precarious hope.* Isn't that always the case? Don't we all reconcile with one space and still long for a home in another? Meena Alexander in New York is as much the Meena in India wanting to have her book cloth bound, wanting to have the tactile feeling on the cover of the book that speaks of her beginnings, almost thirty-six years ago. At the end, poetry has no other home than desire.

RUBANA HUQ IS A POET, RESEARCHER AND COLUMNIST.

BOOK REPORT

An evening of seduction

NABEELA MASWOOD

Few Bangladeshi writers writing in English focus on women-centric characters. So when Dr. Razia Sultana Khan steps up to fill the breach with her wonderful new book, *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction*, one can't help being excited. The launch of this collection of short stories was held on Friday, 27 April, 2012, at Bengal Café on Dhanmondi 27. It was organized by the colleagues of the writer. In the book Dr. Khan shows that "seduction" can come in different forms in the traditional meaning, be it a woman with her tresses flowing free or, more subtly, where the woman herself is being seduced. Sometimes it comes in the form of free tea, offered by the English to seduce a whole nation into addiction. In the preface to the collection, Dr. Khan writes, "Whether from the rural areas of Bangladesh or the urban, women's fates are intertwined in their experience of marriage, desertion and aging." The stories range from those on gender issues to stories of a supernatural nature. Some are sad, some ironic and some humorous. A number of the stories are set in Old Dhaka in the early 1900s. Mithila Mahfuz, Dr. Khan's colleague in the Department of English at Independent University, Bangladesh, emceed the ceremony. Dr. Khan's work was discussed and critiqued by a panel of intellectuals in English Literature and Gender Studies. The programme included a selection of readings from *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction*. The readers were all IUB students. Warda Ashraf started the ball rolling with her reading of an excerpt from the title story "Seduction", followed by Nabeela Maswood, who read an excerpt from "Sunset". Nawrin Sabah read "The Good Wife". The readings ended with the supernatural story, "Night Shift" read by Aysha Myesha and Nowrin Sabah. The members of the panel raised some thought-provoking points. Prof. Khademul Islam said, "Extremely heartening to see (such) a collection of English writing" and went on to add that, "One should read not only with the brain but with the heart". Dr. Firdous Azim called the collection woman-centric and noted that it had a "sympathetic voice" that helped relate to the characters. Dr. Kaiser Huq spoke of the "cultural schizophrenia" that usually created a fissure when writing about Bengali characters in English, but went on to say that the characters were vivid and so were the sights, tastes and sounds of the Old Dhaka of the past. He read out an epigraph to the title story, "Palki" a verse from an English poem by the Indian poet Sarojini Naidu. Dr. Niaz Zaman spoke of the characters and how one could fall under their spell and lose perspective as a critique and become a captivated reader. Dr. Razia Sultana Khan finished off with a vote of thanks to her family, her colleagues and her publisher. This was followed by a Q and A session. The celebration ended with the author signing her book for interested members of the audience followed by refreshments. *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction* is a fine example of South Asian English literature and one which yours truly now has in her collection. Shouldn't you, too? *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction* is available at New Market book shops, particularly at Aligarh and Book Web. It will soon be available at Aranya and Arong.

NABEELA MASWOOD IS A STUDENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AT INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH

REMEMBRANCE

Manto: The rebel in Urdu literature

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Urdu literature owes a huge debt of gratitude to Saadat Hasan Manto. He was one writer who did not believe in skirting around the issues or putting his expressions into symbolisms or arcane formulations. That much was evident in his short stories. You need to recall *Khol Do* (Open) or *Bu* (Odour) or *Thanda Gosht* (Cold Meat) to comprehend the social picture Manto was determined to sketch, especially against the background of the calamity that was 1947. Partition, for Manto as well as for millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the subcontinent, was a monstrosity. Could it have been prevented? You do not come by easy answers to this loaded question. There is that certain feeling in you that had Chittaranjan Das or Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose been alive in 1947, history would be different, indeed that India would stay in one piece. Well, the fact is that Das and Bose were not there; and those who were proved incapable of rolling back the coming deluge, indeed caused it to happen. Nehru messed up things through his own interpretation of the Cabinet Mission Plan in July 1946. And Jinnah, who Tariq Ali thinks, with good reason, was a second-rate politician, simply did not have any clue about what he would do with Pakistan once it came to pass. A million people died in the riots of 1946. Tens of thousands more lost their lives when the process of actual partition set in a year later. To Nehru it might have been a tryst with destiny.

To those who died --- Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs --- as they passed one another on their way to their new homelands, on trains and in ancient villages, it was anything but. For Manto, partition was a deep wrenching of the heart. His heart was not in the thought of moving to Pakistan, but then there were the realities which suddenly leapt up before him, to convince him that he could not stay back. His friends, non-Muslims, urged him to stay back in India. And yet there is the story of another friend, again a non-Muslim, whose flippant remark that he could have killed Manto in the frenzy let loose by communalism worried the writer. Manto moved off to Pakistan in January 1948, a good many months after the vivisection had actually occurred. It was to Lahore that he relocated with his family. With so many other Muslims inclined to matters of an intellectual sort having already left their homes in India to be part of the Pakistan experiment, Manto initially believed that he could stamp his presence in the new country. His, after all, had been an assertive voice as a journalist, film scriptwriter and storyteller in undivided India. He worked for All India Radio. And movies such as *Mirza Ghalib* carried his imprint. But none of that experience was to be of any consequence in Lahore. The state of Pakistan soon began to look upon Manto with concern, which concern turned to plain disdain as his fiction began to make the rounds.



Toba Tek Singh was his high water mark, but it certainly did not endear him to Pakistanis, people who only till the other day were Indians, albeit under British colonial rule. His short stories were condemned as obscene, which only meant that he was compelled to move from one court to another defending his narratives. His run-ins with the Pakistani authorities had other ramifications. Those who in January 1948 had welcomed him to Pakistan with open arms now went out of their way to shun him. The kind of unquestioning patriotism he was expected to demonstrate toward Pakistan was simply not there in Manto. If the partition of India had been emblematic of darkness for him, a disturbing demonstration of collective madness, Pakistan was turning out to be no better. His works were swatted down as filth, to which he had a ready response: if his stories were filthy, it was because the society in which he and his countrymen lived was filthy. That kind of retort did not exactly open new doors of friendship for him. The extent to which his self-

esteem had come under assault was to be noted when an individual presiding over a literary conference in Lahore asked Manto to leave the stage because what he was reading had become unpalatable to the man. Manto refused to leave and simply sat down defiantly on the stage, until his wife convinced him to come down. And that was the supreme irony. A writer who had begun his literary journey through translating into Urdu the works of such masters as Victor Hugo, Chekhov, Wilde and Pushkin was slowly, painfully being buried alive by the state of Pakistan. You might raise that significant question here: why did Manto not turn his back on Pakistan and return to India? Perhaps he was asked this question a good number of times. And perhaps he had stayed silent. Perhaps he did not have the boldness in him, for reasons of family and society, to return to the old homeland. Qurrat-ul-Ain Hyder had gone back, after having made the mistake of moving to Pakistan at partition. Ismat Chughtai did not even think, not once, of relocating to Pakistan. Manto stayed on in Lahore, despite the intellectual poverty he saw strewn all over the place and despite the careful way in which Pakistani society shunned him. Ostracism led to that other difficulty, near penury in the face of his inability to have his works published. The man who had been initiated into soulful writing by the scholar Abdul Bari Alig, back in Amritsar long before the tragedy of partition, was now at the mercy of

people for whom he wrote an essay or two or a story or two for a pittance. Manto's hair began to turn grey. His old humour, which once kept his admirers and friends enthralled, gave way to bitterness and plain argumentativeness on his part. Cheap alcohol consumed him, ever so slowly, and finally forced the life out of him in 1955 when he was less than forty three years of age. In this bicentennial year of Manto's



birth, it is proper to suppose that his contributions to Urdu literature gave it a vibrancy it had never had before. Manto did not romanticise life but saw it as an area with all its beauty and all its ills. He spotted sanity in the deranged; he found basic human decency in women forced into prostitution. Human nature, as his stories show all too well, is hardly anything to celebrate. Good neighbours suddenly pounce murderously on one another, as 1947

proved so conclusively. A state based on idealism could swiftly mutate into a bad symbol of cultural and religious intolerance, as his experience of Pakistan would attest to. His angry despair led him into writing a series of *Open Letters to Uncle Sam*. Even in those early days, Manto understood the leverage America would in time exercise over his adopted country. In one of the Letters, he makes his views clear: 'One more thing. We can't seem able to draft a constitution. Do kindly ship us some experts because while a nation can manage without a national anthem, it cannot do without a constitution, unless such is your wish.' Manto succumbed to liver cirrhosis in 1955. A constitution would elude Pakistan for fourteen more months and then it would be subverted through the first of the military coups that would destroy the country. Did Manto have a sense of how history would look upon him? A hundred years after his birth and fifty-seven years after his death, it is instructive to go back to the epitaph he wrote for himself: *Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto. With him lie buried the arts of short-story telling. Here he lies underneath tons of mud still wondering if he was a better short-story writer than God.* (Saadat Hasan Manto was born on 11 May 1912 and died on 18 January 1955).

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR LITERATURE AND STAR BOOKS REVIEW