

In the Mercy of Time—Flute Music

AN INTERVIEW WITH MEENA ALEXANDER

DANIELA GIOSEFFI

*M*eena Alexander and Daniela Gioseffi first met when they were featured poets at the 2002 Peoples' Poetry Gathering, sponsored by Poets House and City Lore at Cooper Union in New York. That was the year Alexander published a collection of poetry entitled *Illiterate Heart*, which won the PEN Open Book Award. Her latest collection of poetry, *Raw Silk*, was recently published by TriQuarterly Books, and her memoir, *Fault Lines*—one of Publishers Weekly's best books of 1993—has been reissued in a new edition from the Feminist Press (2003). Her volume *Indian Love Poems*, edited for the Everyman series, was published by Knopf in 2005.

Alexander is a poet of Syrian-Christian descent, born in Allahabad, India, and raised in southern India and North Africa. After marrying, she came to live in the United States in 1979. She is the mother of a college-age son and daughter and continues to be a global traveler. In 2004 she was featured at the International Struga Poetry Festival in the Republic of Macedonia and then visited southern India to return to her childhood home, where her aging mother still lives. She is Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at City University of New York.

Daniela Gioseffi is the American Book Award-winning author of thirteen books of poetry and prose. Her latest include *Women on War: International Writings* (2003) and *Symbiosis* (2002). She has received two grant awards in poetry and performance poetry from the New York State Council for the Arts and an award for short fiction from PEN American Center. Her verse was etched in marble on Penn Station's Seventh Avenue concourse wall—next to Walt Whitman's and William Carlos Williams's—in 2002. Gioseffi has published hundreds of reviews of poetry and interviewed many writers, among them Grace Paley, Ishmael Reed, Galway Kinnell, Bob Holman, Robert Pinsky, Sapphire, and William Pitt Root. She has taught world literature at colleges and universities around the New York metropolitan area and read her work for NPR and the BBC as well as on campuses throughout the United States and Europe.

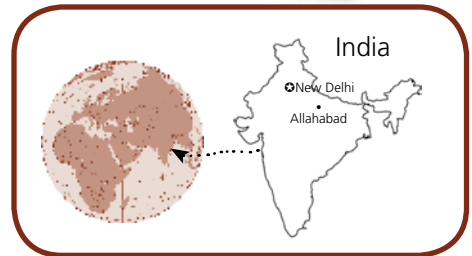
Daniela Gioseffi Your books *Illiterate Heart*, *Fault Lines*, and *Shock of Arrival*, as well as your latest collection, *Raw Silk*, are so unique to your experience as a global writer. Please tell of all the places you have lived, where you were born, raised, and educated, and how the theme of internationalism has affected your writings in both poetry and prose. What languages do you speak and write in, and why did you choose English for your art?

Meena Alexander For years I thought that in order to be a real writer you had to live in one place all your life, one "dear perpetual place," and I was tormented by the thought that I could never be a "real" writer because I had moved about so much. It was just an accident of biography



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that my childhood was here and there, India and Africa. Then, when I was eighteen, I went to university in England. In India, when I



was growing up, for me, as for many children, many languages flowed. There was Malayalam, the language of my parents and grandparents; Hindi, the national language; the language of Allahabad, where I was born; and then English. Later, when I was four, we moved to Pune, so there was Marathi. Then, at the age of five, I went to Khartoum in the Sudan, so there was Arabic and French. I must say I feel quite illiterate in some of the great languages of the world. How I wish I could read classical Arabic, for instance! French I know well. It was almost as rich for me as English in my ability to use it, but it's grown thinner from lack of use. One must live and breathe a language for it to be real, and I so adore the English language: its suppleness, its assonance, its coruscating beauty! I use it to make a home with. After all, sometimes I feel I have no real home except in language. Yet our deepest thoughts and feelings can only be evoked in poetry by the passage through a place without words, a zone of silence.

DG Yes. Your latest book, *Raw Silk*, written after 9/11, is clearly about the sorrow and pity of war all around the

world. I know you were a fan of Walt Whitman's work during your girlhood in South India, too. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman wrote: "I say we had better look our nation searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease." That connects to the themes and narratives in *Raw Silk*, which deals with 9/11, among other things.

MA Yes, *Raw Silk* is about the sorrow and pity of our lives, also about war and civil strife. There is a mother who must kill her child and then herself, in "Opening the Shutters." Children singing in the ground in "Fireflies." The theme of children caught in the midst of conflict. In "Triptych in a Time of War" there are the lines "where will children hide? / The mouth of the cave is rimmed with red." The world feels like a very difficult place just now. Our task is to put out our hands, not to stop up what flows to us. Our task is to instill this all too turbulent flow with our consciousness. The very last poem in the book is entitled "Fragile Places" and it's a meditation about war. Toward the end, there are lines about a "woman washing rice / who turns and stops to write." I think I am that woman. In the act of washing rice for dinner, I stop. The grains of rice cling to my hands. I turn away to write because of the words, music in my head.

DG I believe it's the writer's job to bear witness. That is our function as poets, to bear witness to horror, so that the evil of war can be redeemed by the human conscience. Perhaps *Raw Silk* is a bit further away from your own autobiography in some ways than *Illiterate Heart*? *Raw Silk* is a bit more expressionistic, and the poems rely somewhat more upon imagery than the narrative element to do the work of the poem.

MA The first set of poems in *Raw Silk* evokes 9/11, when I was in Manhattan, and what it meant to write poems in its aftermath. The cycle of three poems called "Late There Was an Island" occurred when I walked out to the linden grove in Fort Tryon Park, near where I live, and I saw the trees, the brush of sky, and felt that words could not happen in that tragedy. Only little crystalline bits of sound could be let in. So, I went for lyric compression. I wanted that tight order to hold things together, when everything seemed, literally, to be falling apart.

Memories are so deeply bound to place, to places, making up a palimpsest for us, for our poems. Manhattan, too, for me, existed in poems long before I came here, Whitman, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and others. It was an idea, and I was wild with excitement to come here from so far away, to live in another country. And I loved that this is a country that honors immigrant stories—unlike England, where I had lived as a student.

DG How did you come to organize the poems in *Raw Silk*?

Four Friends

MEENA ALEXANDER

Makram who loves the wild horses of Jebel Marra,
Tesar and Prakash

Remember me, the girl with a scar on her knee
The oldest of three sisters

Who fled a white house in Hai el Matar,
A girl who came to school too young and couldn't sleep?

At night I dreamt a sailboat on the Nile.
The boat caught fire, we perished together

Four friends lost in that underworld pharaohs sought.
We reached for each other

Through the torn petals of our mother tongues.
Now my sorrow and my love smoulder in a foreign language.

—*I am she come from where I crave again to be—*
Beatrice, girl who died too young,

I read those words thumbing through stacks of poetry
In a library by the Nile. The books have vanished

From the window ledge where I placed them a century ago.
Have they burnt the library?

Nostrils of the wild horses of Jebel Marra
Are filled with ash.

In a city where two rivers meet
Makram, Prakash, Tesir, remember me.

First publication

Note: Jebel Marra is the mountainous region of Darfur, in western Sudan.



MA When it came time to put the book together, I had such a hard time—because I felt I was locked into literal time, September 11, 2001, and September 11, 2002, were worlds apart in both portions of my life. Then a poet friend helped me so much. When I told him of this difficulty, he said: “You need to free yourself of this journalistic thing.” And he was talking about the dates and the places and the events that happened in that way, in that sequential order: “You need to think of it as a spiritual journey.” I am grateful to him for this insight, which really helped me order the book, so that I now think of it as a loop, as a figure eight, with my two countries and right at the heart, where the strands cross, is the title poem, “Raw Silk.” In that poem the child hears gunshots in the streets, and she crouches on the floor and reads poetry. And reading the poem allows her to go through “the vertigo of history.” Yes, I do think of vertigo now, with all the violence, small scale and large, that we are bedded in. And poetry for me is that “flute music.”

DG Your book of poems and essays, *The Shock of Arrival*, deals with issues of dislocation and having to construct a sense of place, as one who lives far from her ancestral home.

MA What haunts me is the idea that whole worlds within, for those who cross borders, lie invisible. When I was a child in my Grandmother Mariamma’s house, a 400-year-old house in Kozencheri on the west coast of Kerala, before we had electricity, I had to squint hard in the glow of the oil lamps to see the page of the book she would hold open on her knee, following the letters, moving her finger along the lines, parting and closing her lips so slowly as she read. Those oil lamps with their luminous, diffuse glow did not ease the task of close reading. Then ten thousand miles away and three decades after my grandmother’s death, in a house not by the Pamba River as hers was, but here, close to the river Hudson, I

bent close to the English dictionary to try to make out the words in front of me: *dislocation*: to put out of place; *locare*: to place; locus, place.

I have to fabricate place so that these images can exist, not as mere bits and pieces of temporality, echoing in my inwardness, but as portions of a shining symbolic space, their fluttering parts, redispersed in a poem. And when I say “poem” I think of what Wallace Stevens calls “The poem of the mind,” the fraught yet fluid meaning-making that allows us to be in the world. But what is also crucial is the labor peculiar to the poet, the material processes of writing and revising so that words stitch their way through the page, the humming hive of the brain, the multitudinous letters of the chosen alphabet bound one to another in coruscating harmony. I think of this as a harmony that underwrites what one might call a poetics of dislocation, in which multiple places are jointed together, the whole lit by desire that recuperates the past, figures forth the future, the thread of gold at the rim of a black horizon.

DG And that idea has helped you become a prolific writer here in a new country, in Manhattan—*despite* your history of dislocation? What made you decide to edit the volume *Indian Love Poems* for the Everyman series at this juncture?

MA Editing *Indian Love Poems* for me, as we live through a time of war, has been a way to keep my heart and soul alive. I was working on the anthology at the same time as I working on some of the poems in *Raw Silk*. I wrote the poem called “Triptych in a Time of War!” which was first published in the *Harvard Review*. In the poem I write, “You have come to a high room, / in search of a language that could tell of love.” There was a certain despair in me as I wrote the lines, and it was a blessing to turn to work on the anthology and read lines that actually tell of love. Some of the poems in this anthology are quite ancient.

Some of the earliest poems come from 600 B.C.E. and were composed by Buddhist nuns of the Therigatha tradition. There are also amazing erotic verses translated from the great classical languages of Sanskrit and Tamil. There are devotional poems of love composed by Jayadeva (his great epic *Gitagovinda*, telling of the erotic, illicit love of the married Radha for Lord Krishna), and there are utterly secular poems, telling of the pains and pleasures of love. I hope it will be a treat for the reader to turn to the many traditions of India that have flowered in love poems. I have tried to catch a tiny whiff of scent from that great garden.

DG I read in *Fault Lines* that you like to write in public places. In your case, perhaps because of all the flying and train travel you've done all your life as a global writer, crossing borders of different cultures, from India to Africa to England to America and so forth? How do you center your mind to write?

MA Yes, I love to write when I am moving or in public places, park benches, cafés, steps, on the subway platform. I love the anonymity and the sense of speed or passage. What greater pleasure can there be than sitting in a bus and jotting down a few lines of a poem as the world passes by, trees, tall buildings, the shifting panoply of clouds? Do you know Krishna, the dark god? He had a flute, and all the milkmaids, called *gopikas*, came to him and fell in love with him, and the forest became a scene of lovemaking. I think of the poem as "flute music guiding me through the vertigo of history," and when I wrote that line (from the poem *Raw Silk*, first published in the *Kenyon Review*), I was thinking of Krishna. How the myths that are there for us in our bodies enter the new world. So that even as I ride the subways and read Dante's *Inferno*, I think of Krishna. There are tears in my eyes when I read Beatrice's lines: "I am Beatrice, come from where I crave / To be again." I often write on the subway or in buses or in planes and in transit lounges. I do not know why I feel safe when I am

in motion, moving, traveling—and the where to is not as important as the act of moving, some fissure in my internal geography compels me to it.

DG I think it has to do with all the travel you were forced to endure as a child growing up, always having to pack and move from India to Africa and back again, and then to England and now to the United States. Perhaps you feel safe when you can keep your own thoughts with you on paper in transit? Your ability to write is always with you, no matter where you go, yes?

MA Ah, you're probably correct! That's no doubt true.

DG What American poets besides Walt Whitman influenced you early on in your career?

MA I am so filled to the brim with the reading of Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters just now, so pouring over at her pain and glory and genius. The febrile precision. The abyss she fronted. So, after many years, when I was so scared of reading her, and read so much Whitman and loved it, now I can turn to her, stand still, and let her music enter me. I used an epigraph from her poetry for *Raw Silk*.

DG You used a very apt quote from Emily Dickinson, too: "The Sackcloth – hangs upon the nail – / The Frock I used to wear – / But where my moment of Brocade – / My – drop – of India."

MA Yes, I've also used lines from Dickinson for the very ending of my memoir *Fault Lines*—the one and the other coming together in the mercy of time, where we are permitted to write. **WLT**

New York City

Editorial note: For more on Meena Alexander, visit the the Academy of American Poets webpage (www.poets.org/malex).