CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

The study of themes and techniques in the poetry of Meena Alexander leads to the following conclusions:

Alexander’s poetry is the subjective poetry that incorporated the personal experiences. It has projected her personal disposition, judgements, values, and feelings. The recurrent use of the pronoun ‘I’ associates the poetic persona with the poet herself in majority of her poems. The poetic persona is a young woman with expanded consciousness. Alexander’s poems comment and deliver judgments about the characters and actions represented, even though characters are from either real life or mythological and historical figures. Her poetry can be well categorized as ‘Confessional poetry’ as it deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet. It has not mere represented the poet’s circumstances, experiences and feelings but has given the details of her private matters about herself including love and sexual experiences and feelings, experience of menstruation, pains of childbirth, mental anguish and pain of exile. In spite of the directness of passion and love expressed in her poetry, it gives the sense of sublime and controlled expression. The large number of poems has the dominance of feeling of being exiled. The feelings expressed are more impatient, urgent and under tension.

The distinct note of passionate utterance runs in her poems about love. Along with autobiographical details, the Kerala background, multiple migrations, consciousness of being born in female body in the Independent India stand as the background of her poetry. Her poetry continuously swings between the haunting memories of the past and troubled confrontations with the present while living as a diasporic writer.
Along with other themes search of place and belongingness has been the recurring motive and purpose behind her writing poetry. Her poetry comes out of the creative tensions arising from pressures and necessity of living in the alien world.

The thought in Alexander’s poetry is true, but always evokes the sense of loss and despair of migration avoiding the joys of life. The feelings are genuine enough but ironically repeated and recurring motive of majority of the poems. Her poems finally express the feelings of Diaspora woman from the third world. Her poetry has dealt with the intense personal world of the continual exile and moves between countries and cultures. She is concerned with the construction of the self and its relationship to memory, history, actuality, and quest of identity. Her discovery of the self through the act of writing is equally imaginative and is based on the wishes, false memories, fantasy, and fact.

Alexander’s poems have significant themes and move us by the notion of affinity to the place and ancestral home. She has used her multicultural background to its fullest effect – her birth in India, growing up in Sudan, Ph.D. in England, her frequent visits to Kerala home in India, and her settlement in America after marriage. Her poetry of Kerala childhood has Kerala land as its fundamental subject and describes it poetically along with historical retrospection and meditation. The poems describe the landscape Kerala with its rivers, paddy fields, hills, and valleys. The description of landscape is interwoven with perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of search of lost place.

The poet has written about her alienation from herself and her environment. The tension between desire to belong and the inability to do so gave birth to her poetry. The traumas of the search for an identity are recurring themes in her poetry. However, in her later poems, she had shed this complexity to deal with the social and political issues. Alexander’s poetry is difficult and highly personal, ambitious, ambivalent and
mystically uncertain poetry. Her autobiographical books give some helpful explanation of it. Her poetry focused on the past and mythicized the matrilineal heritage of Kerala.

Her poems often allude to the feminist and nationalist concerns, the problems of exile and the present life contrasted with the past. The poetic personae and their experiences depicted in particular pattern emphasize Alexander’s concerns with exploitation and subjugation of women by patriarchal power. The grandmothers and other women depicted in her several poems have merged into one nameless woman who has no past. Her poetry has reflected distinctive voices of Indian women who are rural, metropolitan, and migrant, or immigrant. The feminist awareness of the poet has given account of being a dark skinned and a displaced woman and girl child in a land where dowry deaths of women are common incidents. Her poetry is actively engaged with the issues of Indian women such as child marriage, forced marriage, dowry deaths, bride burning, excess of childbirth, illiteracy, lack of nourishment and no access to contraception. The depiction of mother as challenge to the power of father and celebration of mother-daughter relationship in her poetry is influenced by new feminist awareness. She has used birthing metaphors and joy of being pregnant as a perfect female experience to weave new feminist perspective. Depiction of the exploitation of prostitute has presented the more socialist aspect of her feminist consciousness. By depicting the pains of childbirth, experience of menstruating, the poet has expressed her consciousness of the presentation of woman as a biologically determined earthbound creature. Her poetry opposes the identification of women in a male dominated society by their sexuality, flesh, and passions through depicting Cleopatra’s tragic love. Her poetry deals with the issues of suppression and burden of female sexuality with reference to Indian woman.
The inescapable sense of dislocation, corrupted world and its violence are vital issues in Alexander’s poetry. Her poetry has depicted the world of memory and at the same time real world. It recreated brutal death of Safdar Hashmi, the horror of Tiananmen and mutiny of 1857. The devaluation of values, everyday war situation, brutality, bloodshed, threat of terrorism, incidents like 9/11, and cities dwelling on the edge of river of death found expression in Alexander’s poetry. By speaking about partition violence, riots, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the massacre of Sikhs in 1984, demolition of Babri Masjid, Godhra Carnage, Gujarat riots, the poet has expressed the agony of split consciousness converted into a narrow nationalism. Her poems went beyond the recording of events and focused transformation of culturally pluralistic and secular past into the shameful religious extremism and violence. It seems that she is very keen to write on every newsworthy issue in India. However, her poetry has emphasized the need of benevolence and ahimsa, to bring peace and prosperity in the world.

Her poetry is a vibrant response to social and cultural realities. Along with her feminist and diasporic consciousness, her poetry focuses a thoroughgoing sense of racism and oppression in America. The threat of racial and colour discrimination is experienced as an existential depression, a sense of worthlessness and despair. The racial hatred underlines the marginalization and violence involved in crossing the border. However, she has subverted the trap of racialized ‘otherness’ by establishing her poetic ‘self’ through her creative sensibility. Politics is the very real issue in Alexander’s poetry. The themes of struggling to survive come frequently. While living in diasporic situation, fragments of nationalism, ethnic rivalries, bloody wars torn the poet to mould them in poetic form. Through them poet struggles to rewrite her identity while fighting against the fact of racism in the Western World.
The sense of oppression and resistance has made her poetry of contemporary time and global in significance. The poet’s social concern about humanity, men, civil and public liberties is the outcome of her interest in principles of social justice. Her poetry registered resistance against political exploitation and those in the name of religion, race, or gender or in academic circle. The depiction of the victimized people of all classes exhibit poet’s awareness of the power relations between the victim and victimizer. The resistance to corruption, political oppression, human viciousness, exploitation of poor, misuse of power, economic imperialism and environmental destruction come together to express her revolutionary stance.

Alexander’s poetry has been generated out of creative tension which emerges out of her attempt to cross the two barriers namely of writing as woman surrounded mainly by male writers and of writing in a language which is not her mother tongue. The expression in English has hindered the free expression of her most intimate feelings. The loss of mother tongue made it difficult to establish her personal self and cultural identity. However, she is able to transform, the uneasy reality of alienation and conflict, the uneasy relationship between the English pedagogy and the tradition of formal classical Malayalam into an innovative poetry. Writing in English is kind of shame and symbol of colonial burden. However, the poet has pierced through the burden of language to express her truer self by subverting linguistic patterns and rupturing syntax of English. She has captured a particular Indian experience and the strains and confusions of alienation acquired due to the cultivation of English.

Her poetry projects the voice of the subalterns and speaks about the class struggle and class conflict. Being a Keralite, she is influenced by leftist thought. The poet is more elaborate in describing her association with the working class and have-nots. The use of brutal force against
disenfranchised victims of political oppression during the Emergency, the miserable condition of poor, their parched mouths and cry, the wooden hovels, the gutter are the subaltern faces in Alexander’s poetry. Her poetry is the outrageous expression of the oppression and deprivation of the low caste and female and oppression of workers by capitalist powers. She goes on depicting the hunger, starvation, sorrow, prostitution, and denied justice, which makes the sensitive reader restless.

The poet believes in the elegiac function of poetry and uses it as a medium of mourning for the dead. She mourns on the death of father, two grandfathers, two grandmothers and other family members. Alexander’s poetry is not philosophical meditation about death, neither it is about her own death nor death wish and attraction of death. Rather death comes as the repulsive element, which annihilates everybody irrespective of his class, gender, and caste. The theme of death comes as the cause of loss and lamentation. Even she equals border crossing with death. She has written elegies on the death of her father, grandfather, Allen Ginsberg and Safdar Hashmi. The poet commemorates the death of humanity and thousands died in the 9/11, bomb blasts, Afghan War, Godhra carnage, Gujarat riots, thousands killed in Ayodhya, Young of Tiananmen square. The theme of death is not dealing only with personal loss but the innocents massacred worldwide are commemorated by the poet.

The pull of ancestral tradition and culture has led her to refer to the mythical figures like Ram, Krishna, Sita, Draupadi, Kali, and Durga. Westernization has alienated her from the indigenous past. It resulted in dreaming and recovering history through verses. Through alluding to Bhakti poets Kabir, Mira and Surdas, her poetry emphasizes the ancient Bhakti tradition of India and its philosophy based on the humanitarian approach of equality for all beings. She is not a religious Hindu, still cherishes the shared myths of Hindu culture. She thinks of exile of Rama through immigrant’s perspective and Rama’s rejection of Sita through
feminist perspective. She also reflects on philosophy of Shankaracharya. By reclaiming past through history and myth, she has constructed her own version of history and nation. Her poetry promoted the sense of nationhood and superior cultural legacy. By recalling the path of non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi, she has asserted the significance of peaceful Indian resistance in contrast to other bloody revolutions in the world. As a poet, Alexander is the mixture of mind and imagination created by forces of history. She is a serious and difficult poet who has achieved a significant stage in her career as a feminist, an Indian, an Internationalist as a part of multicultural literature of America.

Alexander’s poetry is an example of thoroughly defined artistry. It employs the contemporary modern simplified rhetoric. The poet has used many of the traditional poetic devices to achieve elevated effect. In order to accentuate the feelings of exile, alienation, lamentation, loneliness, devastation, pain, agony and loss the poet uses the device of contrast. Her poetry is engulfed with the illustrations of different kinds and presented number of illustrations from nature, landscape, animal world, social life, violence, war, mythology, history, and the exiled life to elucidate the themes. The device of repetition is used to aggravate the intensity of expressed feelings.

The similes in Alexander’s poetry do not come as added decorations but as essential technique to express the different shades of experiences clearly and to give the impression of intensity. The mixing of metaphor and simile has made her poetry more complex. The rich texture and density of metaphor slow down the reading as images interact to suggest meaning. Along with some fresh metaphors, the occasional clichés are found in her poetry. She uses the device of personification to express her feelings she is speaking about. The devices like alliteration, onomatopoeia are used to achieve not only sound effects but also emotional effects. The ending rhymes come in the course of expression in
some poems. Though her poetry is free from foot and metres, it has its own rhythm realized strongly by the ear. The repetition of words, phrases and lines, parallelism, and frequently asked rhetorical questions add rhythm to her poetry.

The allusion is a crucial factor in understanding the creation and implication of meaning in Alexander’s poetry. The allusions are explicit or implicit textual references, which mark out the chief thematic concerns and purposes of the poet. The allusions emphasize her awareness and recognition of literary tradition and are the part of its structure. Allusions come as reference through naming, quotation, part-quotation, and description, representation of direct speech or indirect speech. It exhibits poet’s familiarity with the original as it is fused with new context of contemporary life. The quotations that precede the poems of Meena Alexander taken from Yeats, Eliot, Kabir, Shankaracharya, Rilke, Rimbaud, Lorca are leading and guiding to the poet’s thought. Many of the poems are academic and show the wide reading of the poet as a researcher and academician. Good number of references from old Greek, Roman, Indian and English literature, and mythologies unravel poet’s intellectual affiliation to literary and mythological characters. There are also some imaginary characters.

The transliteration from various languages exhibited poet’s scholarship and wide reading. The Hindi, Malayalam, French, and Sanskrit words are used for the surprise of English readers. They add to the complexity in interpretation of poems. She has used rhetorical questions to achieve greater expressive effect than a direct assertion. They put forward the inner thought of the poet in philosophical manner and reflect the concern about the self and world.

The use of present tense, absence of punctuation marks, use of rhetorical questions and flawless phrases contribute to achieve the greater effect in Alexander’s poetry. Along with the poetic effects, her poetry has
contemplated on the existential facts of person’s internal and external life. Her poetry is interesting because of the intensity of emotions and feelings it conveyed. The poet uses free verse in arbitrary manner and outpours intense feeling by relating them to the social realities of the world.

Alexander uses unconventional versification for her poetry. She uses free verse with short length lines only of one or two words. She is conscious of burden of using English language. Therefore, her poetry presented radical departures from the rule of languages. Her poetry reveals the use of poetic devices as alliterations, repetition, inverse word order, parallelism, paradox, synesthesia, and many others. The most notable features of her verse are repetition of words, phrases and lines, parallelism and frequently used rhetorical questions. It makes her poetry incantatory. Her diction and versification achieve noble, serious, and elevated effect. Because of the use of techniques, her poetry has become complex twentieth century modern poetry.

Though English is the second language, poet is proficient in it. Her poetry is flooded with emotions. The richness of poet’s language is worth remarkable. Her poetry is neither easy nor exotic but requires efforts to understand it as it is the product of her artistic skill and a wide range of experiences. The poet has used concrete and vivid diction. However, her poetry is also full of strange collocations, bizarre images, and complex symbols. The concrete diction of her poetry exposes itself in its variety of imagery. The juxtaposition of unexpected or impossible images, which occurs in surrealistic imagery, forms the major part in Alexander’s diction. The abstract diction has elevated her poetry from ordinary level to philosophical. The recurring use of abstract words has made poems indecipherable for the readers.

Alexander has borrowed words freely from ancient world, classical French, Urdu, Malayalam, Hindi, and multiculturalism of USA, Western intellectual traditions and feminist movements. Her diction, style, and
versification exhibited her Indian consciousness and revolutionary spirit. There is blend of American and British English in her diction. Being very academic, hence deep, and slightly boring her poetry gives the sense of verbosity and wordiness. Her poems are spontaneous overflow of her thoughtful mind and her diction is replete with fresh and original phrasing. The use of adjectival and adverbial phrases to delineate a distinctive quality of a person or a thing is abounding. The hyperbolic words and phrases are used to intensify the particular situation, thoughts and feelings. The diction from all occupations has been used by the poet, although the technical, biological, ecological, and astronomical words are abound. The metaphors are clichés as well as fresh and are taken from the vastly wide range of references. The words are just juxtaposed without using any connection.

The poet has used geographical words bountifully to give the sense of geography of psyche and displacement. Through ecological images and phrases, poet expresses her ecological concern. There is proliferation of words of bloodshed, violence, wars, weapons, sorrow, and suffering. Symbolism has added to the expressiveness of the language. The explorations into her poetry prove that her diction is governed by social usage and is loaded with the words related to migrations, contemporary issues, violence, political changes, fanaticism, terrorism, feminist terminology, and experiences of living exiled life of black woman in USA. The diction is full of ambiguity and is permeated with historical incidents, memories, and bizarre associations. Her diction includes paradox, ambiguity, the contextual change of meaning, and irrational inversion.

The distinctive feature that strikes reader’s mind is the use of picture images, which present writer’s imagination before reader. Poem after poem presents the vivid and various images, which come out of poet’s detail and minute observation of life. These objective and
descriptive images work as the objective correlative for the poet’s emotions in many poems. The sensitive and lively images in her poetry are thoughtful and precise. Most of her poems are sad and gloomy and avoid the expression of any sense of joy. Therefore, the imagery also presents the unattractive side of human life in general and migrant woman’s life in particular. The images in Alexander’s poetry are kaleidoscopic images. Imagery illustrated, clarified, and concretized the poet’s sense experiences into words.

The variety of animal images, birds, reptiles, and insects are present in Alexander’s poetry. There are animals such as cows, buffaloes, pigs, frogs, lions, leopards, bullocks, monkeys, goats, dogs, elephants, tigers, gazelles, hyenas, and jackals. There are birds like crow, peacock, koil, cuckoo, thousand eyed owl, hawk, dove, lemming, sparrow, swallow, parrot, bat, kingfisher, gull, mynah, phoenix, hummingbird; reptiles like snakes, cobras, lizards, rats, earthworms, silkworms and scorpions. The insects are mosquitoes, fireflies, bees, ants, beetles, ticks, and butterflies. There are also water creatures like fish, and water snakes. The animal imagery is interpreted variously as it refers to the human passions, emotions, virtues, vices, joys, and sorrows. The poet has skillfully used them for expression of her thoughts and feelings. The poetry of Meena Alexander is overshadowing with the images of blindness, darkness, and blackness. The association of darkness with terror or mystery is obvious. It seems that darkness has surrounded Alexander’s poetry and intensifies the atmosphere of gloominess and despair and loss of home and lamentation. The darkness is assisted by the images of blackness and blindness. This world of darkness, blackness, and blindness is accompanied by the death. The death intensifies the gloominess and atmosphere of violence and bloodshed. However the ray of hope is suggested by using many images of light and brightness. Stone is the
recurring image in the poetry of Meena Alexander. The rock and stones are the part of distinct portions of geography that allow poet to anchor her inner world to make sense of place. Her poetry is besieged with powerful images and memories from India and evocative pictures of the Hudson River, the roaring subways and the raucous bus traffic of New York City. She employs landscape imagery very skillfully to express her feelings of estrangement and alienation from her homeland. The body imagery of eyes, heads, bones, mouth, flesh, tongue, wrist, womb, palm, tooth, nail, sinew, veins, hands, feet, back, belly of the mother, cheek, throat and hair are abound in Alexander’s poetry. They are very realistic, sensuous, sometimes disgusting and very expressive of the emotions and feelings that the poet experiences in her life. Alexander has used scatological imagery, mainly to express her social concerns, despair, and feelings of personal loss after migration. *Raw Silk* presents the picturesque description of destruction of twin towers on 9/11. It also describes the destruction of tomb of Muslim poet Wali Gujarati by Hindu extremists during Gujarat riots. The image of destruction of Babari Masjid situated at controversial birthplace of Rama in Ayodhya and the recurring image of Mohenjo Daro in all poetic volumes stands for the ruin and destruction of ancient civilization and comes as the alarming bell to modern people. Nature provides proper setting for the memories and past related to Kerala landscape and connects her with the present in USA. The nature imagery in her poetry has wide range from the paddy fields, hills, and valleys of Kerala landscape to San Andreas Fault and Niagara Falls. Some of the poems of Meena Alexander are extremely complex and obscure due to the use of surrealistic imagery. The free association of images and inversion of all grammatical rules has been used to depict the surrealist images and to focus the inner working of poet’s mind full of despair and gloom. The image of silk comes recurring in Alexander’s
poems and it has been major image in the collection *Raw Silk*. The images of mulberries and silkworm are abound in Alexander’s other poems also.

To increase the expressive power of language, she has used symbolism and images on extended scale. In some poems, her symbols are straightforward and are easy to interpret. However, in some poems, her symbols become complex, personal, and complicated. She employed symbols to convey her inner sensation, her vision, her migratory experiences, feminist feelings, and sensuous passions. Alexander’s symbols are highly evocative and suggestive and created the impression of complexity, richness, and intensity in poetry. Symbols are drawn from the diversity of sources such as myth, history, the worldly issues, personal feelings, academic career, multiple migrations and lived in places. Her family members like grandmothers, grandfathers, mother, aunts, children, daughter, and son have been converted into symbols. Some symbols are used in poem after poem, changing and expanding their meaning. The symbols and images are carefully woven into the pattern of the poem. Her dominant symbols are house, mother, grandfather, roots, birds, garden, snakes, stones, trees, silk, and tower.

Alexander’s symbolism has potential of multiple interpretations. The overlapping of symbols makes the interpretation and elucidation of poems complex and gives rise to many contradictions. Symbolism is an important technique of Alexander’s poetry through which she could communicate her ideas and vision. The unseen is made seen by the use of vivid, concrete images, which due to their constant repetition acquire symbolic significance. The images like grass, sea, rivers, birds, trees, gardens, houses, of earth, stars, sun and moon are all used as symbols to convey poet’s perception of life. Personal emotions are woven into patterns of images and symbols to express poet’s love, pain, sufferings,
and ecstasy. Like Yeats, Alexander has used the symbols in abundance, which are sun, moon, wheel, family members and mythological figures. The symbols are important tools that help her to depict the primary passions of the heart, passions of life, death, feminist consciousness and diasporic agony, birth and rebirth, violent destruction and her terrorism, and even the noble joy of creation. Alexander also employs archetypal symbols, which are passed from one generation to another through the collective unconscious, and they form group of universal symbols. Such universal symbols include symbols of colours, of the quest or journey, sky, earth, light, darkness, wheel, the archetypal woman, the wise old man, the Garden, the tree, the desert. Her poetry has the philosophical strength, experimental material, and approach. The symbols such as house, bird, water, garden and vegetation, abstract symbols, muse, mandala, plough, snake, mother symbol, grandfather, tower symbol, symbol of barbed wire, symbols of Mira, Draupadi, and Sita are the major symbols in Alexander’s poetry.

Thus, Meena Alexander is a multi-lingual, multi-educated, and multi-travelled poet. Her poetry is not restricted only within the circle of feminist awareness like many of the contemporary women poets. It is not restricted to memories of childhood and family history. It often alludes to political and nationalist concerns, problems of exile, living in a foreign culture and notions of identity. She is the poet of mind and imagination. The variety of poetic devices, diction, imagery, and symbolism enhance the thematic aspects of her poetry. These techniques amplify the intensity of the feelings and thoughts of the poet.