Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences.

In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

This week's guest, Meena Alexander, is a distinguished professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center. As a practicing poet and scholar, Professor Alexander has a special interest in post-colonial writings and contemporary poetry and poetics. These areas are tied in with her ongoing reflections on autobiographical writing, feminism, Indian Ocean cosmopolitanisms, transitional migration, trauma, memory and identity.

Welcome, Meena.

Thank you.

In the recent edition of Rattle, you were described by the Indian Statesman as "undoubtedly one of the finest poets of contemporary times." You are a prolific poet, essayist, writer and commentator with a unique voice in this moment of global nationalism, xenophobia, racism and misogyny. Your forthcoming "Atmospheric Embroidery," it seems the title itself suits this moment. Its contents include poems about the rape of a girl in Darfur, Sudan, in India, and your experience of the U.S. 2016 election. It seems that the triumph of misogyny and the day after when millions of American women were in shock, not only American women, but women around the world, I think.

Just this week, in observation of Martin Luther King's birthday, you were quoted by NBC from your poem "Winter Light." You were quoted as saying at this speak-out by other writers and artists, "The right to free expression is something we treasure and is essential to our lives in a democracy. Remember and do not forget the power and creativity of shared expression, the ability to repair and remake the fabric of this fragile world we share."

That is really powerful, and you have such an incredibly creative and important voice, Meena. How does your poetry and who you are in the world speak to this moment?

You know, Tanya, thank you for your kind words, but in a strange way, my biography, I know this is sort of late in my life, I'm not in my 20s, you know, I'm in a much later moment, but in an odd way, it seems as if all the streams that have made up the strange life that's become mine, or is mine, have seen ...

You know, I always thought I was a strange creature because I had moved continents in childhood, after Bandung, the Bandung conference, my father was
posted by the Indian government to Sudan. I went back and forth, so I had India, I had Africa. When I was 18, I went to England, and this whole question of transnational migration is something that's stitched into my life, and I think it's taken me almost til now to realize that this is the material out of which I write. You only have what you're given, right?

Meena Alexander: But the whole question of being female is so crucial to me, because all the experiences I have come to me in a woman's body. And I was brought up in a traditional Indian household, albeit, outside India, but also within India, where being a woman was treasured, but there were also certain things you were not supposed to do. And it always shocked me that it was alright to have a woman be educated, but not to perhaps make different kinds of decisions for herself. And then there was violence.

Tanya Domi: Yes, violence seems to animate, not only your poetry, but you talk about this in your writings. I would think that it feels right now, in the contemporary context, that there's a lot of violence being exacted. I've actually talked about this, drawing parallels between the attacks on American women and what happened in post-USSR Eastern Europe and my work in Yugoslavia, where women's bodies became targets of the war through policy, as military strategy.

Tanya Domi: But now we're seeing it where there's been a concerted effort over many years, in this case, by the Republican party attacking women's bodies, and now the current regime in Washington has made no, they've made no exception to how they're going to go after women, and deny them access to reproductive care, for example.

Meena Alexander: You know, one never thought, 20 years ago, or maybe 25 years ago, that we'd be living through this moment in the United States, because when my daughter, who's now 31, was a young woman at Barnard, they took feminism for granted, and certain gains that had been made in the area of reproductive rights, for instance. And it's absolutely shocking to me that such things are happening.

Meena Alexander: But, you know, to go back to the use of women's bodies in wartime, I mean, rape as an instrument of war is all over the world, if you think about the Bangladesh war, if you think about the partition of India in '47, and further back, unfortunately. So I think that what is very important is that at the grassroots level, but also at the larger creative levels of people speaking out in different parts of the world, I think that there is perhaps a joining. Look at all the women coming out in the streets in New York City and in Washington. Such things haven't really happened for women, right?

Tanya Domi: In a very long time.

Meena Alexander: In this country, yeah. There are other things.
Tanya Domi: Sure. There was second-wave feminism in the '70s, but we're in a different moment entirely.

Meena Alexander: It's a very different moment, and I think that a lot of ... You know, when I was part of the feminist movement in India in my early 20s, very much issues of life and death, like dowry deaths, people being burned in their homes, and women came together and went out into the streets. And we used to think that some of American feminism, not all of it, because certainly there have always been women of color issues very powerfully in this country, were more psychological in some ways. But this is not the case now. I think that now, women in this country across different arenas are realizing that these are issues that we have to speak out about and go out into the streets.

Meena Alexander: I mean, this is a great democracy. You know, the United States and the country I come from originally, India, are the two great democracies of this world, and both are in the grips of certain kinds of right-wing extremism.

Tanya Domi: It's true. And let me just say, because I'm going to go back to your poetry, is that the moment that we all gravitate to and remember is the morning after the election, and in "Crossroad," I'm particularly drawn to this section, and I want to read it to our listeners.

Tanya Domi: "I hear your voice, brood and it will come, a seizure of sense, a reckoning. Write with chalk, sticks of lead, anything to hand. Use a bone, a safety pin, a nail. Write on paper or stone. Let the poems smolder in memory, in the desolation of time, write how one linked the bubble with a woman's name way at the top of the paper ballot, saw her own hand quiver."

Tanya Domi: It's just very powerful for me, very powerful, because remembering the elation of walking into the polling station and voting for Hillary Clinton, the first woman ever nominated by a major party in this country, and then the ensuing hours of horror that took place. I, of course, was at Jacob Javits, having worked in support of her candidacy, and leaving that arena at like 3 o'clock in the morning, and still, you know, living in a sea of fog, really through April of 2017. So this poem, "Crossroad," is so powerful. Can you talk about this?

Meena Alexander: The poem, which, in the original incarnation was called "Winter Light," I read Jan. 15, 2017, in public on the steps of the New York Public Library as part of a PEN gathering of writers resistance. And I wrote it almost for that occasion, because I thought, normally ... I mean, not normally, but sometimes, I have very, very deeply personal poems, but in this I thought, you know, Meena, you really have to put it out there. It doesn't matter what anyone thinks.

Meena Alexander: And I was crossing the road to come into the graduate center right to this building very shortly after the election, and I saw this whole storm of white men on motorbikes with American flags, and I was just terrified. And it threw me back to the moment when I was inking in the name of Hillary Clinton with that
bubble in the polling booth, and I had tears in my eyes, and I thought, you know what, I'm going to tremble. And how can this, this is amazing.

Meena Alexander: And then, of course, subsequently, all that happened was something I couldn't really keep in my memory, so it had to come out into the world around me, in the symbolic space that a poem makes. And I think, in a way, the imagination does allow us a space to bring together the horror of the truth, but also the extraordinary beauty of what is possible. And I do think this is the space into which poems move.

Tanya Domi: Mm, that's really beautiful. So, I'm thinking, I mean, also, just what you said. So is this the American moment, for writers and artists and playwrights? Sort of akin to, I met Vaclav Havel when he was at Columbia many years ago, he did a residence there. When he emerged in Czechoslovakia, when artists behind the Iron Curtain came to the fore and began speaking about oppression and how they grappled with living under, in this case, the yoke of the USSR, but we're having this moment in America. It's an unprecedented moment, I mean, and certainly in my lifetime. I mean, McCarthy, of course, was in the '50s, and I was a child at that point. I was a baby, actually.

Tanya Domi: But in this moment, in the modern era, there's never been a president like Trump, nor there's never, maybe even, arguably, in the history of the country. But now, you were just doing this writers speak-out, you were doing a writers speak-out just after the election. Is this a moment for the American creative class to come forward and speak truth to power, and truth to oppression?

Meena Alexander: Well, I think there have always been great American writers who've done that. And I do think that this moment is very crucial for writers, because what is at stake is one's ability to express the truth as one sees it, the imaginative truth, and not be censored. People also self-censor out of fear, and this is something you realize if you're growing up under a dictatorship of sorts.

Meena Alexander: Whereas, in this country, what is extraordinary is we have certain rights enshrined in the Constitution, and let's not forget also, this is also the moment of energy of something like Black Lives Matter, and then after 911, to be a South Asian woman like myself, or a person of color, brown person, is certainly, quote unquote endangered, not in a massive way, but in a small way.

Tanya Domi: Certainly.

Meena Alexander: You absorb these things, and I think that what is ... It's a frightening moment, I think, for many of us, but it's also, by the same token, a moment where we really have to stand on our toes and walk in the streets or do whatever we can, however it comes. You know, I'm not one for saying that everybody has to speak out in a certain way. I don't believe that. I think even the fall of a leaf can be political, if it's limned in a certain light.
Tanya Domi: So not only do you have "Atmospheric Embroidery" coming out in June, but you're also the apparent editor of the forthcoming "Name Me a Word: Indian Writers Reflect on Writing," in 2018, Yale Press, includes such luminaries as R.K. Narayon and Salman Rushdie, as well as Arundhati Roy. This is really quite prestigious. Can you tell us about this book, as well?

Meena Alexander: Ah, Tanya, it's been a labor of love for many years. I think it's taken me about six or seven years, at least, and I've had also, I must say, the help of marvelous graduate students, research assistants, in our own department in English, and we've been digging through material, finding translations, and it was very important to me to have many women writers in there, also from the Indian languages, so the great writers whose names may not be very well known, or known at all in the United States, including Dalit women writers, Dalit meaning the category of the formerly Untouchables.

Tanya Domi: That's right.

Meena Alexander: And very powerful voices speaking out, which I really hope that the readership in the United States, that people will read and respond, just as human beings, and make this ...

Meena Alexander: You know, the great thing about the mansion of literature is that there are so many rooms in it, and if you can hear a voice from a distant room and recognize it as very close to your own, there's an extraordinary moment of illumination, and perhaps something of that, if one is fortunate, will emerge.

Tanya Domi: Well, whoever gets to read this book, it'll be a great pleasure, I think. It'll really introduce the subcontinent in a new way.

Tanya Domi: Part of "Atmospheric Embroidery" is your writings on the rape of a woman in India that became a international incident and received extensive press coverage. One of the things that came out of that, actually, was the reporting about how single sex abortion may, in fact, have generated a sociological phenomenon of men roaming around on the streets in packs, and women have become the unfortunate recipient of their rage, perhaps, their disaffection. But this incident was really something that I followed very closely at the time it occurred. So, I would you to read "Moksha" for us.

Meena Alexander: Thank you. "Moksha" is a word in Sanskrit that means liberation, and I started this poem when Jyoti Singh Pandey, who was called Nirbhaya, which means "Without Fear," in the papers, because victims are not supposed to be named, until her father came out and said "You should use her name." When this terrible rape occurred, I was actually in Italy doing some poetry readings, and I started this poem, and then I traveled to India and completed it.

Meena Alexander: And she was raped, she was picked up just outside a bus stop near Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, where, at the age of 23, I used to work. I was a
beginning professor there. And I know that bus stop, and I know the fear I used to feel standing there, in case there were men roaming around. You know, this is the awful thing, Tanya, but as a woman, wherever you grow up, you draw this fear into yourself. You see, and it shouldn't be like that. It shouldn't have to be like that.

Meena Alexander: And so, this poem is called "Moksha," and it's divided into sections. Part 1:

"At the tail end of the year, leaving the dry season behind, I saw leaves the color of sparrows wings dissolve into the brick work of a railway station. A sudden turn of the head and there she stood on a dusty platform, wool sweater, smoldering hair, the familiar heaviness of flesh, aged a few years, my sister-in-law. After all, the winds of the underworld will do that to you. By her side, a suitcase, glistening leather bound with straps. Inside, a packet of powdered rice, a morsel of coconut, three red chilies, fodder for the household gods."

Meena Alexander: Part 2:

"Last night, in dreams, I watched her in a crush of women severed from their bodies, drifting as slit silk might in a slow monsoon wind. By her in a kurta knotted at the sleeves, who knew that spirits could beckon through clouds. The one they called Nirbhaya, a young thing raped by six men in a moving bus, she fought back with fists and teeth near Munirka bus station, where I once stood, 23 years old, just her age, clad in thin cotton, shivering in my sandals."

Meena Alexander: Part 3, this is the last section:

"Now, I hear them sing, in delicate recitative, my sister-in-law and Nirbhaya, that other, less than half her age, a song as intricate as scrimshaw, and vowels that flowered before all our tongues began. Their voices the color of the bruised Roses of Delhi."

Tanya Domi: Thank you, Meena.

Meena Alexander: Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Meena Alexander.

Meena Alexander: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.