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K. R. Meera's *Hangwoman*: An Exploration of Blending Myth and History

Sonali Pandey

Research Scholar, KNIPSS, Sultanpur (U. P.)

Dr Sunita Rai

Associate Professor, KNIPSS, Sultanpur (U. P.)

ABSTRACT

History is the record of incidents occurring in the past while mythology tells the story within the context of society formation and identity creation for men and women on the formulated theory of contemporary society. It has been seen that the ancient context of history and mythology was constructed within the partiality for women. The present research paper explores the epistemic violence on women taking shelter in the past history and mythology especially in the masterpiece work of K. R. Meera.

Keywords: *History, Mythology, Feminism, Patriarchy, Modernism and Postmodernism*

FULL PAPER

K. R. Meera, the Keralite Indian novelist and short story writer wrote a thought-provoking novel, *Hangwoman: Everyone Loves a Good Hanging*, (Aarachar) a Malayalam novel initially translated into English latter, got published in 2014 which ventilates the themes of gender, myth, and history. The novel was set in the Kumaon hills between 1840 and 1912, representing the experiences of women in Gokhale's own family. It tries to shed light on their painful stories that have often been overshadowed or silenced by the intellectual bodies. The novel seems to be lingered about the opinion of Copenhaver who states:

“The study of gender and gender roles dominated much of the scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and psychology during the last half of the 20th century. The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but these terms define different concepts and are not interchangeable” (Copenhaver, 16).

Through a captivating blend of familial history, folklore and mythology, the novel offers a fresh perspective on women's roles and the intricate nuances of their identity formation within a male-dominated society.

This captivating and intricately crafted work of K. R. Meera takes place in the bustling city of Chitpur, in the surroundings of Kolkata, India. In this novel, Meera skilfully unveils the complex tapestry of life in this urban underbelly, where death lurks at every corner and becomes an integral part of daily life for its inhabitants. At the heart of the story, one can find the Grddha Mullick family, whose lineage seems to span centuries and predates even the time of Christ. Despite their ancient heritage and working well in their fields, the Grddha Mullick family now faces the harsh reality of poverty. Their financial situation has worsened alongside the decline in the number of executions in recent years. The chief member of the family Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick is eighty-eight-years old, who has a self-proclaimed veteran of 451 hangings and his family seems to suffer a lot. His daughter, Chetna, once a promising student, is forced to abandon her education due to the family's financial constraints after completing her senior secondary because she was the girl and for a girl, what needs more education. Her mother, being a polite and submissive lady, often finds herself overshadowed and marginalized by her domineering husband for her womanliness. Her brother, Ramu da, bears physical scars inflicted on by the father's criminal executions, serving as a constant reminder of their crucial past and add to the simmering tensions within the family. The grandmother, known as Thakuma, adds her own presence to the family dynamic. Alongside Thakuma, Phanibhushan's brother and his wife, also affectionately referred to as Kaku and Kakima, contribute to the complexities of the family's livelihood. Amidst this backdrop, Chetna's uncle Sukhdev, affectionately known as Kaku, stands as a weathered figure, even at the age of sixty-five. He carries the responsibility of the family and cares for his two young daughters, Rari, and Champa, at their age of five and ten respectively. Throughout

the novel, the author seems to peep into the complexities of feminine identity in a male-dominated profession, especially exploring the various challenges Chetna faces to navigate this unconventional path for a lady. Men have right enough to gaze ladies, either they are just double or dark in their age or colour and it can be seen in this novel in the reference of Maruti Prasad,

“He was a couple of inches shorter than me when I stood up. Very slowly, I took the dupatta off my chest. He gawked greedily at my breasts. I tied a noose in the bat of an eyelid and smiling at him, put it around his neck like marriage garland” (Hangwoman, 8).

In addition to Chetna’s personal journey, the novel also probes into the experiences of other female characters, through their interactions with her and the challenges they face in a patriarchal society. By weaving the novel into these themes, the author prompts readers to critically examine the power dynamics at play and reflects on their real-life counterparts which can be evidenced with these lines:

“I got up, opened the door, and went out. People had gathered outside our tea shop. In front of them, three well-dressed, well-groomed, sweet-smelling pretty women sat, as if on a podium” (Hangwoman, 24).

When Sumati Singh with her long nose, high forehead and red lips asked, Chetna Mullick, whether she wishes to work as a hangwoman or not, she replied,

“I have neither a wish nor a non-wish... They looked at each other, surprised. It was clear that they did not expect such answers from the daughter of an uneducated hangman.” (Hangwoman, 24)

Through skilful narrative construction, the author compels readers to critically judge their own assumptions, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of gender relations and opening up new possibilities for coming generation of the women and their expectations by breaking the traditional ways of womanliness in the following principle of Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 267). By making herself free from the constraints of gender norms, the protagonist embodies the idea that individuals, irrespective of gender, possess diverse capabilities and strengths, by prompting readers to reconsider the limitations imposed by societal expectations and embrace the potential for transformative change. When Chetna was offered her job, she was relieved from her tension but she knew the reality of her life,

“I lowered my head and remained silent, I alone knew that it was not a matter of courage; it was more of helplessness. This was my last refuge, this gallows tree” (Hangwoman, 73).

Furthermore, Chetna’s journey becomes a beacon of hope, inspiring readers to engage in meaningful advocacy efforts and take tangible actions to dismantle gender biases and foster a culture of inclusiveness. As the narrative propels towards its conclusion, it leaves an indelible imprint on the reader, igniting a call to action for collective empowerment and transformation. She was enquired about by Sanjeev

Kumar: "This is work that can throw even men off balance. Do you think that a woman like you, Chetna, is capable of it?" (Hangwoman, 87) She responded him in a tone of confidence, "There is nothing a woman can't do." (Hangwoman, 87) She was further enquired of, "Doesn't the sense of sin at having to kill another human being bother you?" At this she clarified, "I don't kill; I merely pull the lever..." (Hangwoman, 87), responding all the males that if they can do heinous work, a woman can do the same in the same consideration.

Through her journey, readers are inspired to advocate for her change in their respective spheres, sparking conversations, policies and practices that dismantle barriers and celebrate the diversity of human potential. In this novel one can see the epistemic violence of Elaine Showalter through the few lines of the text: "True it was. I was taught at a tender age that women do not reveal their troubles. I always had to think a lot before speaking openly. And I would end up lowering myself in my own eyes, revealing things too late" (Hangwoman, 108) Her curiosity wants to know about man's love which was cleared by her grandma. At this, Thakuma laughed.

"Man's love is different from woman's. A man can love only the woman who gives him pleasure. But a woman is capable of loving even those who hurt her." (Hangwoman, 110)

With this discussion, she came to know the reality of man's love. In this connection, Chetna's journey in the novel serves as a powerful commentary on gender inequality and the struggles faced by women who dare to defy societal norms. Moreover, the novel also delves into the fears and anxieties surrounding women who exhibit agency and power, particularly when it comes to violence against men. These fears and anxieties are explored through the portrayal of her character, as well as through the reactions of other characters in the novel. Her unique role as a hangwoman disrupts established gender norms, challenging the patriarchal structure that dictates women's roles and limits their agency and autonomy.

Through the compelling journeys of Chetna, her mother, Ma, and the grandmother, Thakuma, the novel intricately weaves together the complexities of tradition and modernity, by exposing the triumphs and tribulations of women as they navigate in the societal expectations and discrimination. It can be seen in the portrayal of the three leading female characters, Chetna Grddha Mullick, Amma, and Thakuma, in the different forms of resistance and strivings within the patriarchal society. Another character in the novel who adds to the complexity of female strength is her mother who embodies a different form of female strength. She is portrayed as a resilient and wise woman who, despite her own personal struggles, supports and empowers Chetna in her unconventional role. Her mother strength lies in her ability to navigate and challenge societal expectations while providing guidance and support to her. She encourages her to envision to Sanjeev Kumar as a means to establish stability in her life, likening him to a ladder. Simone De Beauvoir's observations about femininity came to be followed as:

“No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that is the human female present in the society. It is the civilization as a whole that produce this creature intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 9).

Chetna’s mother, deeply concerned about her daughter’s future, urges her to consider settling down with Sanjeev giving importance of pleasing him and winning him over, suggesting that fulfilling his desires will secure her future as she thinks that men hold significant power akin to gods and must be revered and pleased by women. Thus, she implores Chetna to embrace Sanjeev’s proposal and to make him satisfied in the marital relationship:

“Don’t ruin it... For women like us, marriage is an escape route. It was for me. A place to sleep... some food, at least once a day...Listen to me, men are like gods. If they have no one to fall at their feet or beg or worship them three times a day, they are mere stones” (Hangwoman, 251).

It came to be characterized by male dominance, male identification and male-centric decision-making, women are often denied the autonomy to select their life partners but the protagonist of the novel, Chetna, seems to fight against these patriarchal constructs pointed out by Adrienne Rich:

“A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.” (Adrienne Rich, 57- 58)

It can also be evidenced with Niharika, Chetna’s sister, who endured her father’s authority and control and found love with a young man at Nimtala Ghat to conduct his father’s final rites. Together, they embraced a harmonious life, finding solace and support in each other’s affection. Phanibhushan vehemently opposed their relationship, expressing his anger by destroying a statue of the goddess Durga, a cherished gift from Niharika’s lover and also, he is looking against Chetna: “Don’t forget that this is a hand that’s hanged four hundred and fifty-one people” (Hangwoman, 202). Phani does not stay here. He also terrorized Niharika saying that he has the power to convert murder into suicide: “Reduce the length of the rope a little and doctors won’t be able to tell whether it was murder or suicide” (Hangwoman, 198). Niharika was violently married to another man against her will with her father’s waring, “If they do not agree, I have to take hard decision. And whatever they may be, you will have to obey.” (Hangwoman, 204) However, Phanibhushan’s gradual acceptance of her daughter’s new role indicates a subtle shift in perspective, suggesting the potential for transformation within the breaking social norms which can be seen in the text: “Hey girl, they have brought five thousand now. And they will give another five thousand.” (Hangwoman, 119) After her profession, Chetna was also lured with: “That young fellow’s been smart... all this, thanks to him... really fortunate that he got attached to you...Your caste mattered most in the old days. If you were born an

aristocrat, you had nothing to fear” (Hangwoman, 119) about. Further she was persuaded as, “But not today- no matter to whom you are born, it is money that counts. If you do not have hard cash, you are a nobody. Look, God has given you a chance...I was thus forced to continue as the symbol of women’s strength and self-respect for India and the whole world.” (Hangwoman, 119) it narrates the reality of the world. Nothing is small or great, only the power of money decides and defines men and women in the society.

Sanjeev Kumar epitomizes deceit and sensuality, stemming from a troubled lineage as his father was a Naxalite and his mother a prostitute. He duplicitously offers aid to Chetna in her journey to become an executioner, even pledging marriage to appease her father. Donning a façade of virtue, he beguiles all with his charming demeanour and agreeable mannerisms. However, his initial encounter with Chetna is marked by humiliation and intimidation, instilling fear in her by saying, “I want to fuck you hard, even if only once!” (Hangwoman, 27) Organizing a TV show titled ‘*Hang-woman’s Diary*’ for Chetna, he covertly orchestrates her participation to boost ratings and garner personal fame as the interviewer of India’s first female executioner. In a callous display of self-serving ambition, he coerces Chetna into staging a mock execution for public consumption, disregarding the trauma inflicted upon her in the opinion of Virginia Woolf, who says in *A Room of One’s Own*, “Men have treated women as inferiors for many years. It is the men who define everything in the society.” (Woolf, 28) Laws, conventions and taboos often seem crafted to either oppress women or benefit men, with little regard for women’s emotions or needs in the judgments devised by men. Kadambari, for instance, faced a death sentence for fatally striking her husband while he engaged in sexual relations with another woman. When questioned by Mosh, the executioner tasked with hanging her, about why she killed the man she loved so deeply, she replied that she did so to liberate her husband from the clutches of that wicked woman. She expressed a desire to die swiftly so she could reunite with her husband in the afterlife. The novel distinctly depicts the anguish and hardship endured by women who are victimized, subjugated, exploited, oppressed, and subjected to molestation in patriarchal societies:

“There were two charges against her. First, she murdered her husband, her living God. Second, she had interrupted the sexual act, ... The Pandits in royal court debated for a long while about which of these was the more sinful transgression” (Hangwoman, 211).

Thus, the inclusion of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and other male characters in the exploration of power, tradition and gender enriches the novel’s portrayal of social discourses which offer a nuanced understanding of the forces at play within the characters’ performances. He manages a meeting with Kartik, Jatindr Nath Banerjee’s brother, under the guise of offering financial assistance. His true intention is to stage a stimulated hanging of Kartik, vividly portraying the ordeal his brother endured with. However, Chetna intervenes, recognizing that the noose would not fit Kartik but instead fits Sanjeev. Overwhelmed by haunting visions of deceased women and memories of past mistreatment inflicted by Sanjeev, Maruti Prasad, and the Inspector

General, Chetna cunningly loops the noose around Sanjeev's neck proving her ability for the work: "I tied his hands behind his back with it. It was I who undid the first two buttons of his shirt. I touched the hollow of his bare neck with a finger...Here; this is where the noose tightens...Our bodies were so close, they nearly touched." (Hangwoman, 431) Forgetting all about her affection, Chetna performed her action:

"Forgetting that we were surrounded by strong lights and the whole world, I looked into his eyes with desire. Slowly I tightened the noose. Then, lightning fast, I pulled the other end of the rope. Sanjeev Kumar rose to the ceiling with a stifled moan...The noose tightened on his neck and he screamed 'Amme!' (Hangwoman, 431)

Further one can see that Chetna narrates the pathetic tale of Utpalvarna, a woman engulfed by the cruel tragedies of seduction, betrayal, and abandonment. Being pregnant and left behind by her husband, who went on a trading journey, Utpalvarna is plagued by doubts cast upon her chastity by her own family. Forced to leave her home while carrying a child in her belly, she seeks a resting place for the baby and goes in search of food. Unfortunately, upon her return, she discovers that her child is missing. Consumed by grief, she decides to return to her natal home. On her journey, she is captured by Devadutta, a man enthralled by her beauty. He forcefully claims her as his bride. Again, she became pregnant and give birth a baby girl. Despite her initial submission, the loyalty and devotion of another man's wife is always questionable. He plagued by constant suspicion of Utpalvarna's loyalty and devotion, subjects her to relentless torment and bickering. One day, during a quarrel, Devadutta strikes her and tragically injures both her and the baby she was cradling in her arms. As she lies there, stricken with grief and pain, Utpalvarna realizes the harsh reality of her situation when she became his wife, succumbing to his desires: "She cursed and beat her; even tried to kill her. One day, she caught the young girl by the hair and was about to dash her head on the wall when she noticed a large scar on the back of her head." (Hangwoman, 284) The young girl told her tragic past and conditions through which she is being departed from her mother. Her mother thought her dead when she accidentally had fallen down and committed suicide. Finally, Utpalavarna realized that this girl was her own daughter, surprised by her own ignorance and seeing the tragic turn of her life, "she set off on a journey seeking the meaning of life, relationships and experiences" (Hangwoman, 284).

At another place, Binodini's extraordinary talent and enchanting beauty captivate all who behold her. Both Girish Chandra Ghosh and Binodini harbour ambitions of constructing a magnificent theatre. However, Ghosh soon realizes that their dream cannot materialize without substantial funding. Desperate for resources, he persuades Binodini to sell her body. Left with no option, she descends into prostitution, yearning to portray iconic roles like Sita, Draupadi, Radha, and Savitri on stage. Binodini is stunned, having given up her acting career at its pinnacle: "She was rendered speechless when he told her, you are after all a beshya, what do you have to lose? ...My life is full of bednagathas, heroic tales of sorrow, she wrote later in her autobiography." (Hangwoman, 221) The captivating performance of Binodini

mesmerized the audience, particularly drawing attention of the people who were willing to do anything to possess her. As she sang with a melodious charm and delivered her lines with masterful finesse, Gurumukh Ray, a wealthy Marwari, found he enchanted by her, prepared to give her chance “any amount of money if Binodini could be given over to him as his concubine.” (Hangwoman, 221) She begins frequent the bedchamber of Gurumukh Ray, a young zamindar, in order to secure funds for the completion of the Star Theatre. Being disconcerted, Binodini gazes at him calmly, as if she were on stage playing the role of Sita or Draupadi and offers a gentle smile on everybody. In her speech, she seems to challenge the Shakespearean line for women, ‘Frailty! thy name is women’ when she speaks of, “It is you men who have taught us to betray!” (Hangwoman, 224)

Mythology serves as a lens through which the novel examines the human condition, belief systems, and the interplay between past and present. The influence of mythology in the novel is profound and multi-faceted, permeating every aspect of the novel from its characters to its themes and setting. The incorporation of myth adds depth and richness to the narrative, inviting readers to engage with timeless stories and their relevance to the modern world. These mythic underpinnings not only enhance the story but also provide a framework for understanding the characters and their motivations. By drawing upon ancient myths and legends, the novel delves into the collective unconscious and taps into archetypal ideas and symbols. For instance, the protagonist's connection to cultural myths and legends shapes her identity and drives her actions away from its root. The presence of mythology in the novel enriches the language and narrative structure, providing a sense of depth and resonance. It also serves as a tool for character development, allowing the readers to understand the motivations and struggles of the characters in a broader context.

The tale of Tripurasundari is a terrifying narrative which is marked by her harassment at the hands of men and her subsequent vengeance upon them. Her beauty and joyful laughter tragically transformed into a curse. Further, whenever Chetna giggles, her grandmother recounts the story of Tripurasundari as a cautionary tale, indicating the epistemic violence of the feminism as she points out a woman's laughter invites bad omen, calamity, and misfortune:

“Women should not laugh. That's a bad omen. The house where a woman's laughter rings – it won't be long before it collapses. ... When Pingalakeshini laughed, not just the house, but the very land fell”. (Hangwoman, 172-73)

Tripurasundari's name symbolically hinted at her breathtaking beauty and magnificence which can be evidenced with: “Tripurasundari was a peerless beauty. Her laugh was like bells pealing, and it had the power to seduce any man.” (Hangwoman, 174) The text represents the thought of bad omen: “She got married at the age of seven. Once she was going with her husband. Tughan Khan heard her innocent talk and sensuous laughter and was attracted to her. Old enough to be her father, Khan lifted her forcibly. She was six months pregnant then. The tender delicate innocent enticing charm of her made her a prey of Tughan Khan's cruel voluptuousness and later on of other males. The men enjoy ravaging and ravishing her

beautiful soft body by their lust.” (Hangwoman, 175) Women may have mercy on the poor condition of men but men have mercy on women even at their dangerous time: “Tughan Khan shows no mercy either on her age or on her condition. By that time she was pregnant. Whenever she was summoned to the room of Tughan Khan: —the guards would have to carry out her torn and ravaged body afterwards.” (Hangwoman, 175) She made Tughan Khan’s execution a big show. She took her revenge by giving him slow death.” (Hangwoman, 176) Finally, his brutality came to be revenged over, “Pingalakeshini made Tughan Khan ascend the gallows again and again. Seven hundred and twenty-seven times to be exact. (Hangwoman, 181) Pleased by her show, further Balban asked if she wanted anything more:

“She demanded the job of a hangman to take revenge from all men folk. She has dispatched thousand people in her life. Chetna supports her stance by saying —is that a woman’s anger is such that it cannot be satiated with the death of just one man”. (Hangwoman, 177)

The incorporation of biblical allusions and symbolism in the novel further adds a layer of contemplation and emotion for readers, enriching the narrative with additional layers of complexity and depth. The fusion of myths and cultural references in the novel serves to deepen the thematic exploration of gender, power, and identity. The mythic structure of *Hangwoman* is very evident through the incorporation of various myths such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which are used as a framework to explore and challenge societal norms. Through the reimagining of these myths, the novel presents a thought-provoking commentary on issues such as gender roles, agency, power dynamics and the complexities of modern Indian society. The mythic structure of the novel reflects the enduring relevance and power of mythology as a tool for understanding and dissecting social issues. It is through the fusion of myth and modern storytelling in the novel that the author is able to present a nuanced examination of complex themes, using them as a lens through which to examine and critique societal norms and expectations.

To conclude, blending with folklore and reality in this novel, Meera artfully portrays her characters to create a captivating tale that challenges the conventional boundaries of patriarchy in the context of history and myth. As the story reveals the fact and fiction, formation and moderation, the readers are immersed in the rich cultural tapestry of Kolkata, where myths and folklore are intertwined with the lived experiences of the characters, blurring the lines between the fantastical and the tangible humanity. Further, one can also see that with great mastery the author artfully utilizes folklore as a narrative tool, infusing the novel with a sense of timelessness and cultural resonance. Through the seamless integration of folklore and reality, the novel invites readers to question the dichotomy between the two, prompting a deeper reflection on the enduring significance of folklore in shaping social beliefs and values for men and women. By portraying the protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, as a modern-day mythic figure, Meera not only challenges traditional gender roles but also highlights the inextricable link between folklore and lived experiences. By examining the overlapping layers of myth and history, readers are encouraged to re-evaluate the

conventional delineations between myth and historical truth, acknowledging the profound impact of mythological storytelling on the perception of the past. In this way, one can concern the historical and mythological concern of feminine struggle and identity in this novel of K. R. Meera.

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