

TRAVERSING THE FEMININE: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST READING OF *HANGWOMAN*

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Abstract:

Postmodern feminism, an umbrella term, is an approach to feminist theory that encompasses both postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy. It upholds deconstructionist techniques of blurring boundaries, discarding dichotomies, and embracing multiple realities rather than searching for a singular truth. K. R. Meera's Hangwoman can be grouped under the rubric of post modern feminism where the novelist questions the notion of gender and attacks the dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. A postmodern feminist reading of Hangwoman can contribute to feminist struggles to overthrow the sex/gender system, eliminate gender dichotomy, free women from patriarchal ideologies of femininity, and liberate women from gender discrimination and oppression. The present paper explores the feministic perspective in Hangwoman.

Keywords: *Postmodern feminism, gender dichotomy, dialectics of body, deconstruction.*

As a socio-political movement that aims to disrupt and displace the contemporary conditions of discrimination and domination, feminist theory has focused attention on the politics of representation, knowledge and power. Concerned with the representation of women, it tries to liberate the self from all traditions and conventions. Feminist thought and criticism in the twentieth century has assimilated theories associated with postmodernism. The postmodern feminists challenge the incarnation of women as nature, truth, and sublime; and reverted the notion of considering them as idols of worship. The question of the real essence of women is the location of hotly contested debates among postmodern feminists. They criticize concepts of sex and gender and the essentialist notion about women and men.

One of the most prominent aspects of postmodern feminism is its preoccupation with the body. The last couple of decades have brought a magnificent growth in the study of the discourse of body. The body is a cardinal channel through which people negotiate social and cultural meanings and identities. The human body has been represented in a diversified manner across a range of cultural and historical locations. Thus, the dialectics of body has been ever since a problematic issue. As the famous sociologist Bryan Turner says, "The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing- a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity" (Turner 8).

The significance of the body and its representation has been a contested issue in the twentieth century. As the French historian Bernard Andrieu remarked, the twentieth century has been marked by the "epistemological dispersion of the human body" (qtd. in Flanagan and Austin 81). The body has become an object of intense investigation and extensive exploration. There has been an explosion and proliferation in the study of body especially in the context of cultural studies. It enhanced a panoramic vision including other disciplinary thoughts comprising philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, linguistics, feminist and gender studies.

The advancement in medical science coupled with consumer culture geared an interest in the body and reconstructed our concept of it. Body, both natural and cultural, in the postmodern concept is not monolithic rather a space where elements from diverse cultural, political and social discourses converge

and interact. It is a metaphor; its fragmentariness and beauty, its illness and disabilities, and its metamorphosis and vulnerability conspire to mirror the political and social order.

The violence and vulnerability of the body are hailed recently as an object of study in all theoretical parlances. Feminists are involved in the analysis of the body especially female body and its role in the formation of subjects and the reproduction of social life; and also the various cultural and social practices that contribute to the evolution of the female body. Thus cultivation of human body is a consistent cultural exercise.

The body is often seen as something which is candidly biological, natural, and given. The notion of the body is central to the feminist understanding of the oppression of women. Women's bodies have been viewed as the root of temptation which has alarmed to corrupt the rationality of men's existence. Feminist critics have reacted against this and posit the notion of gender as a 'performance'; and scrutinize how the performance of the self responds to male ideological constructions of the female. Virtually, the body vanishes as a biological entity and instead becomes a socially and culturally constructed product which is highly unstable and intensely modifying. The female body is always emblematic and is the site of complex power negotiations, subjected to explicit forms of physical and psychological violence.

Demolishing the popular reading of texts, K. R. Meera emerges as the renowned writer in Malayalam literature. Popular with both literary scholars and the reading public, she has earned a distinguished reputation among feminist writers for her exploration of women's issues. Her writing stands out as a token that subverts the authorial figures of patriarchy.

K. R. Meera's novel *Hangwoman* (2014) is the story of the history of an *arachar* (executioner) family, plotted in Kolkata. It tells the story of Chetna Grddha Mallick, a twenty two year old girl who becomes the first professional hangwoman in India. The novel can be grouped under the rubric of postmodern feminism, where the novelist questions the notion of gender and attacks the dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. A postmodern feminist reading of *Hangwoman* can contribute to feminist struggles to overthrow the sex/gender system, free women from patriarchal ideologies of woman and femininity, and hence liberate women from gender discrimination and oppression.

Even after the proliferation of feminist activism and women empowerment movement, the status of women in the global environment is still deplorable. Even during the modern times their condition remains unchanged and in a sense growing worse day by day. The instrument of body has been used by patriarchy to subjugate them. Female body has been employed as a commodity for the carnal gratification of male desires. Thus, body is used as a weapon of violence and also as the tool of resistance and defense. The inherent potential of a woman to resist domination and power relations is epitomized through the character of Chetna. By projecting the daring and determinant protagonist, the novelist is reversing the cultural images of women; and thereby investing in the power of women.

The novelist redefines the dominant cultural norms and shows how power functions and shape the understandings of womanhood. Hither she presents a woman who transcends the limitations imposed by society. The story moves on a short span of time, a couple of weeks from May 18 to June 13, with a wider coverage of the herculean feats of the historical characters. There is hardly any documented history glorifying female characters. Instead it documents women as submissive self yielding to physical, psychological and sexual persecution.

The word 'hangman' seems to create the image of a man. The word denies the feminine noun and it is considered as a masculine one. Usually the job of execution is being undertaken by men. On the contrary, Meera's protagonist is a twenty two year old girl, Chetna Grddha Mullick, who dares enough to take up the job of execution. The job of execution demands presence of mind, courage and strength which are supposed to be masculine qualities. Patriarchy imposed too much restriction on women regarding such jobs and portrayed them as incapacitated for those jobs. "These women ... by their very nature they are second thoughts. This isn't a job for them" (Mullick 58). These historically established inequalities

restricted women from entering in to the field of labour market.

Choked with violence, the novel pendulates between historical and fictional events, dating back pre-Christian era, to the present day Kolkata with its focus on the central protagonist Chetna. History, dominated by men, is not a comfortable place for women. In history women are relegated to a position of almost complete subordination. History empowers the mighty men of valour. Reversal to this, in the novel history is supplemented by the victim, a woman, Chetna. Almost all the historical incidents and events of the Grddha family are being told by her. She tries to empathize with those mute victims of her stories. Her stories are evidences that show women can exist only as 'male-defined masks and costumes' in the male mastered antiquity. (Gilbert and Gubar 19). These stereotypical representations of women in history, conveyed through myths and converted into role models, limit the possibilities of women.

Set in Kolkata, the novel tells the story of how the protagonist Chetna, who is culturally molded by the dominant ideology, transcends the boundaries of gender hierarchy by demolishing the notion of femininity. Born to a family of celebrated executioners, she has enforced to do the job of lawful killing. Dazed and confused at the beginning, Chetna receives the news of her appointment. But later she becomes determinant and ambitious, and the job of execution becomes a passion for her. Day by day she grows zealous and is even more assertive to carry out the death sentence of Jatindranath Banerjee who is prosecuted for rape and murder.

Indian society is crystallized in a matrix of patriarchy. In the cultural context, the complexity of the patriarchal tradition in India arises out of society's dual attitude towards women. She is respected as mother and at the same time oppressed as daughter and wife. As Simon de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 267). Society shapes her and makes her fit into the norms put forward by it. Chetna is born as a human being, but the elders construct her identity as a woman.

The institution of family as the root generator of patriarchal practices grooms the young to accept sexually differentiated roles. At a tender age gender distinction creeps up and thus the socio-cultural preaching play an indispensable role in the differentiation of the girl child from the boy child. As the girl child grows older she experiences gender discrimination and is not allowed to enjoy her life properly. During their childhood Chetna and her brother used to play publicly ignoring the societal surveillance. But the situation changes when she became an adult. "When we were children, Ramu da and I used to run into the street to gather the hailstones. The last time it hailed, large hailstones fell which looked like tiles of the sky's glass roof. By then I had grown up so I could only stand leaning against the wall, making a noose with my dupatta and watching them melt" (Meera 2).

Brought up by the patriarchal giant Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, Chetna is restrained from the mainstream and is confined within the four walls of her house. Phanibhushan, Chetna's father, has great concern for her and is so much protective. However he used to supervise and control her by imposing all his decisions on her. Caught between culturally determined stereotypes of carriers of tradition and continuity, Chetna tries to assert her individuality by transgressing the gender roles. She is taught and trained never to utter a word against her father.

There is a belief that to be feminine is to appear weak, futile, and docile. But Chetna breaks this notion. Any assertion from her part is supposed to diminish her femininity and attractiveness. She is more resolute in her decisions and thus she stands apart from a traditionally constructed woman. She defies the entire construct of history, culture, and moral values. Here the novelist attacks the dominant belief that women are less capable by portraying Chetna as the successful performer of the gendered profession of hanging. Thus she emerged as a symbol of strength and self-respect to the whole world.

Although the body provides a basis for the construction of patriarchal social relations, these relations are themselves seen as shaping the bodies of women. Torn between her ambition and family, Chetna faces control over her body that holds her back. As an obedient wife, Ma, Chetna's mother has to adjust a lot to fit into the male dominated patriarchal structure. The mother figure, especially if she happens

to be a widow, is expected to possess archetypal fortitude, and follow an intensively rigid moral pattern of life. Thakuma, Chetna's grandmother, bravely witnesses the death of her son, her daughter-in-law, and her grandson. She, being a widow, operates and manipulates her body to possess all those androcentric ideology.

The concept of the 'gaze' became popular with the rise of postmodern philosophy and social theory. The 'male gaze' is an actuality in our society that continues to exist as long as men stare at women in an objectifying manner. Hence the male spectator, male character, male reader, and the macho camera are complicit and conniving in looking.

People are interested to peep into the lives of others. Usually media did the role for them. It produces patterns of individuals whose lives are laid bare before us to scrutinize and criticize. As a result the public extract essence of pleasures by watching and looking at one another. Thus by becoming Peeping Toms, people surreptitiously gazed at another's private life and condition.

Thrown suddenly into the world of celebrity, by performing in her own reality show, Chetna's life shines under the flashes of camera. Being an emerging celebrity, the public get interested to glance at Chetna's private life. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are important gratifications from presuming media. Without any embarrassment Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and his channel CNC encroaches into the domestic affairs of Chetna and overpowers and overrules each and every member of the family. Here the novelist shows the perversity and voyeurism of mass media and its inevitable role of surveillance in everyday life. In depth experience in the media politics provides the novelist ample insight into the dirty tricks and malicious tactics of the field.

The novel explores both the patriarchal male gaze and the female anti-gaze phenomenon. In a patriarchal society, male gaze is found to be a common phenomenon, yet, feeble attempts of women's anti-gaze is gradually looming large to challenge patriarchy. The novel is shown through the vulture eyes of Chetna. Almost all the incidents and characters are being shown through her lens. It is only through the reversal of the dominant male gaze that a female can retrieve the autonomy of her body and sexuality.

In the novel, Sanjeev is described through the gaze of Chetna. Chetna gazed at the image of Sanjeev appeared in the channel. Thus Sanjeev is made an object, and becomes the particular object of her desire. She takes on a masculine role as the bearer of the gaze and the initiator of the action. Thus she nearly loses her traditional feminine characteristics. Sanjeev is introduced to the readers through the lens of Chetna. Symptomatically, Chetna gives a stereotype description of his physical appearance.

Meera, by presenting Chetna as a new woman, is trying to make the society aware that a spark of rebellion may be present even in the most submissive woman. Chetna is made an object of desire at the beginning of the novel itself. The novelist has invested Chetna with the power of a dominant yet destructive gaze to direct at men in the similar way as men gaze at women. Chetna created a critical space where the binary opposition of woman as object, and man as subject was continually deconstructed. Comparable with male gaze, sexual objectification is another strategy adopted by patriarchy to subjugate women. Sanjeev repeatedly objectifies her with his gaze. He sees Chetna as a sex doll for satiating his sexual hunger.

Language occupies a prerogative place in creating and contesting an ideology. Language is one of the forms of power politics that hegemonize the society. Intensive research has been carried out in recent decades to show the relationship between language and gender. Language, a significant carrier of cultural norms, plays a crucial role in labeling one 'male' or 'female'. As children, both male child and female child are restricted as segregated speakers. The male child is gradually released from the restrictions of childhood but the female child is groomed to respond rarely and remain silent or passive. Thus they learn how to be girls and boys, how to become feminine and masculine, from their early childhood. As a result language behavior reflects the social dominance of men and weakness of women.

Language is androcentric; it has been developed and controlled by the male sex. It is one of the

potent tools wielded by the dominant groups in society to create binary opposites. Postmodern feminists believe that language has always been exploited to incarnate patriarchy; it is man's strategy to keep women passive, obedient and submissive. Through this novel the author shows the dual functions of language—language as a weapon of dominance, and language as a strategy of resistance. The use of female language by Chetna as a kind of strategic essentialism enables her to unravel the emptiness of patriarchy.

The novelist gives a detailed account of the lives of women in history. History which portrays 'his' story often fails to voice 'her' story. As Chetna sadly opines, “Only rarely did the history of the women in our family get recorded” (Meera 109). There are certain historical conditions under which women operate. Most of the historical women survived through the stories of Chetna and Thakuma are denied the access to language. They were mute and silent and were not supposed to own a language of their own. They are denied access to power since their linguistic performance underlines their inability to exercise power. As Deborah Cameron opines: “Language is a weapon used by the powerful to oppress and silence the subordinates” (Cameron 1). Those who dared to raise their voice were incarnated as devils and demons and thus were denied to enjoy a normal living. In a society in which any departure from the norms of passivity and silence is condemned and labeled as devilish, Chetna is the only woman who not only does break the silence but also seeks different modes of resistance strategies like laughter in order to break the verbal prison.

Meera also shows the linguistic custom of respect and how it shackles women. Women are supposed to respect all the male members of the family irrespective of their age, and a violation of it is often considered a grave sin. A Woman is expected not to say words which really irritate men. She must obey his words and must pay due respect to it. Social silence is a part of female identity and subjectivity. There is a traditional belief that silence gives the proper grace to women. Chetna's is the voice of resistance in the novel who by her subversive adaptation of the so called 'andro-centric language' unleashes a violent protest against the patriarchal attitude of the society.

While exploring the language as a mode of resistance Meera also explored the possibility of silence as a resistance strategy. Silence can be a potential tool of resistance when it practices a lack of participation in the socialization process. She narrates the story of Chinmayi Devi, the wife of the first hangman Radharaman Mullick. Radharaman had fallen in love with her and married her. She served him as if he were her living god. She never blamed him for the loss of her love. But the moment she had stepped into his bedroom as a bride, she had forsaken words and laughter. He asked questions, begged her forgiveness, and tried to soothe her. But she never uttered even a single word. She had given birth to ten of his children but refused to breastfeed them. She took refuge in her own silence. Chinmayi Devi's resistance is so hard that even the author remarks that it is the biggest punishment that her husband could ever receive.

Of the three- *Sristi*, *Sthithi*, and *Samhara* - the first two are usually associated with women. But nobody had made a daring attempt to relate *samhara* with women. Meera succeeded in her attempt to create a character and ascribed her with the third feature which is normally alienable to women. Chetna is a woman who carries out the role of *samhara*. Meera, by presenting Chetna as a new woman is trying to make society aware that a spark of rebellion may be present even in the most submissive woman.

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