

Gothic Feminine and the Enigma of Death: Exploring K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman*

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Abstract

This article delves into the gothic themes and feminist undertones in K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman*, exploring its intricate interplay of death, storytelling, and female empowerment. By drawing parallels between the protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, and Shahrazad from *The Arabian Nights*, the narrative redefines gothic femininity within a socio-political context. Chetna's storytelling and her inherited role as a hangwoman underscore a radical critique of patriarchy, violence, and societal marginalization. Infused with magical realism and vivid death imagery, the novel examines the transformative power of storytelling, positioning Chetna as a symbol of resistance and agency in a deeply patriarchal world.

Keywords: Gothic Feminine, Death Imagery, Storytelling, Patriarchal Critique

Human consciousness ceases with death, rendering it one of the most suppressed and enigmatic concepts within society and culture. Death is inherently mysterious, and its discussion or observation often poses a significant challenge across various cultural contexts. Gothic literature is deeply engaged with the theme of death, portraying it vividly, leveraging its presence to create an atmosphere of horror, and contemplating the notion of an afterlife. The fascination with horror stories is intrinsically tied to the intrigue surrounding death, as such narratives provide an outlet for repressed anxieties. Notably, death and storytelling share a profound existential connection; storytelling offers a means to impose a semblance of order in life, albeit illusory, temporarily distancing the inevitability of death as though it were absent.

Storytelling, which often provides a semblance of a consolatory false eternity and the prospect of a new beginning, has long captivated human imagination. The effectiveness

of storytelling relies not only on the narrative itself but also on the style and persona of the narrator, who often commands admiration for their creative inexhaustibility. Among the most celebrated storytellers is Shahrazad from The Thousand and One Nights, also known as The Arabian Nights. Shahrazad uses storytelling as a strategy to save herself and countless other women from death, continuously weaving narratives to distract the king from executing her. Similarly, K.R. Meera's protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, in *Hangwoman*, bears striking parallels to Shahrazad. Like Shahrazad, Chetna is characterized by her wisdom, eloquence, and sensitivity. However, the novel situates her in a grim socio-economic reality, where poverty and vulnerability compel her to embrace the ancestral profession of hangmanship

From the time Chetana was old enough to think for herself she was used to hearing about death and her family lived near Nimala Ghat in Ganga where almost hundred and fifty dead bodies are cremated a day. She woke up to sounds of hearses and the smell of burning pyres enveloped them. Born into a family of hangmen she had a skill in making nooses and once caused the death of a playmate with her perfect noose though she wasn't aware of the consequences playing hangman. Chetana's skill for story telling was cleverly manipulated by Sanjay Kumar Mitra, who pretends to love her, in order to make profit out of it. For him she was just a sensational piece of news which he could market before it loses value. But by the time she finishes hang woman's diary she discovers the destructive powerful force in her. All those stories are compiling into her personal fairytale. She emerges as a Chamundi capable of killing men who scorn her love and tenderness. This paper attempts to delineate the death imagery used by the author in the novel *Hang woman- Everyone Loves a Good Hanging*, originally written in Malayalam by K.R Meera and translated into English by J.Devika. It also tries to expose gothic feminine or female gothic in the novel where a radical critique of male power, violence and predatory sexuality is expressed more clearly through grisly imagery than is possible in the realist mode. As Susan Becker puts it

In some ways, the new feminine texts points to such a change: the idea of *woman*- the natural or ideal feminine-is being shifted to *women*- in all their historical differences. The gothic here foregrounds the hidden horrors of a unifying and universalizing image of Woman...(Becker 4)

Feminine reality becomes terrifying to the readers and it fits into the gothic genre with its gruesome depiction of women's world. Set in Calcutta, *Hangwoman* has Chetana's poverty stricken life and her attraction towards a Sanjeev Kumar Mitra who works in CNC TV channel. Chetana is very proud of her ancestry and inherits the skill of storytelling from her father Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, whom she calls Baba.

Ours has been a family of famous hangmen for very long, right from the times when the Nanda kings ruled the land. Our roots sink deep to four hundred and twenty years before Christ... That was long before the white and black towns came up. Thakuma took proud in the fact that even the chaturvaranya had taken shape much later... The entire grandmother's tales we heard were of death of some sort.

(11)

When the governor had rejected the mercy petition of jatindranath Banerjee, Chetana's father thinks of handing over the job which he got after thirteen years to his daughter as his son Ramdev was disabled. At the suggestion of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, who had an eye on her from the beginning and the whole story, revolves around Chetana's preparation to hang jatindranath. Chetana's mother was not happy with the suggestion as she thought this might affect Chetana's further as a girl. Somehow Sanjeev Kumar Mitra brings Chetana into the limelight of his television channel as he makes a contract with Chetana's father to make her recount the stories of her ancestors under the title Hang woman's diary. This gives him a chance to get closer to her and her skill in storytelling gives a very high rating for his channel.

There is no repression or euphemism when it comes to the description of the gruesome details of death and violence in the novel. While tracing the history of her ancestors she gives vivid description of different types of death. Even while describing deaths of little children Chetana shows a detachment which eventually helps her to carry out her hanging without being overcome with emotions. She describes the death of her friend's child with all its horrific details. "Six year old Amolika's eyes had been gauged out. Her limbs had been hacked off her neck had been pierced with an iron rod" (276)

The family history which can be traced back to two thousand years had rare presence of strong women who spoke against the male chauvinism. Ratnamalika, who was born in the family in the thirteenth century with birth mark that ran down from her face from forehead to chin is presented as the representing the possessed woman who could defy the patriarchy with her madness and prophetic skills.

.....When her father died, her mother not yet seventeen was forced to commit sati. Ratnamalika was just a toddler then; she had a severe fit seeing her mother being dragged to funeral pyre. When she turned seven, the family tried to get her married. She splattered cow dung water on the groom's family snarling furiously that she was Chamundi, nor sati. And very soon the dark scar made a thick layer on the right side of her face, covering it entirely. It made her face ugly and terrifying to look at. young children who were

frightened by her face- which was strikingly fair on one side and scarily dark and bear like on the other- shouted 'Demon, demon' as they threw stones to drive her away...The fits worsened as she became older .foaming at the mouth, eyes bulging out of their sockets, tongue sticking out.....(124)

Chetana believes that she was born to be a hang woman and never doubts her ability to hang a man and unlike her mother who blames the profession of the Grddha mullicks for all the misfortunes in her life she takes pride in her ancestry. She is more attached to her grandmother Thakuma who always boasts of the mighty tradition of their family. She knows that hanging is an art and death too has a beauty and it could be made more beautiful than life. Like her great grandfather Mosh she wanted to make the condemned man feel better. Two characters who mould Chetana are Ramuda, her brother and Thakuma. Ramuda had no interest in the hangman's profession which fetched no income as there had been no hanging for years. He was educated and was crazy about football. But he became a victim of his father's profession as his arms and limbs were hacked off by the father of a person whom Phanibhushan had hanged. The family lived on the income they got from the salon run by her uncle Sudev Kaku, Chetana's uncle, who lived in the same house with his wife and two girls and the tea shop run by her own father. Sudev Kaku, often blamed by Chetana's father for being henpecked was unable to do the hanging on his own and only helped Phanibhushan in his job. Chetana, though senses the hypocrite in her father, often takes pride in his skill as a performer which probably was the result of his experience in the drama troupe. Chetana has inherited his skill in speech and wit. Shahrazad in Arabian nights insists on marrying the king and take the risk of getting killed however much her father dissuades her from that. She tells him that he should not deny her a chance to save the rest of the women in the country from getting killed. She instructs her sister Dunyazad to come along to the palace and ask for a story in the presence of the king. It was the unfinished story which gives life for shahrazad and a thousand women in the country. Chetana was forced to tell stories, but her inborn skill in stories makes her fall in love with storytelling. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra traps chetana into the profession with his skill as a channel reported. He even offers to marry her so that her future won't be darkened by the profession. This was his way of persuading Phanibushan to have the contract. Chetana on the other hand agreed to be part of the contract because she loved Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. "Sanjeev Kumar Mitra!" Father jumped up, furious. I will finish him with my bare hands"

Father was wrong. He was to die by my hands. That's why I was attracted to him from that very moment. He was special with his exceptional height, thick straight hair, and long straight nose. It took me much longer to be convinced that the feeling I had for him was what people called love. The kinds of love that the likes of us experienced were all like the noose fixed

between the third and fourth vertebrae. Either the noose tightened and the person died, or the cord broke and the person escaped. But even those who broke the cord could never completely untie the noose from their necks.
(19)

Chetana in the course of time realizes the betrayal and it strengthens her intention to become a hang woman. she narrates the story of Manasa, goddess who was the illegitimate daughter of Siva and a serpent woman comparing herself with the revengeful Manasa. Chetana visits Alipore central jail with her father and sees for the first time the noose of a hangman. A noose is a hangman's weapon to carry out the government's order. According to chetana, it was a very easy job for the members of her family to make a noose. She herself had made a noose from her mother's womb with an umbilical cord. Chetana's stories have a basic difference from shahrazad's as the former tells stories to make the king life oriented, the latter's stories are all about death and how different the ways in which her ancestors had executed people. The men and women in her family had always been in love with the noose. Chetana often is reminded of Niharika, her elder sister who was found hanging in her father's room, the first death by hanging a Chetana ever witnessed. Chetana realizes that her father was capable of killing even without government order and she preferred not be a victim but the persecutor .Her employer's attempt to molest her gave her a chance to see herself as a hang woman.

I was neither fearful nor nervous. Instead, laughter bubbled up in me. Setting aside the writing board, I stood up... very slowly I took the dupatta of my chest. He gawked greedily at my beast. I tied a noose in the bat of an eyelid and smiling at him, put it around his neck like a marriage garland... He struggled hard but I took all that force on my left arm. He thrashed about desperately, his eyeballs bulged and his tongue hung close to his chin. Slowly I eased my grip.(9)

Whenever Chetana gets tense, she used to make nooses with her dupatta. Chetana sometimes sympathized with the contempt and it was then she feared her hands. "I wish I could hide my hands somewhere. The day I realized that my hands had the strength to kill someone, I started fearing them" (55) as her program on the television becomes more and more popular she realizes her strength as a hang woman and learns to sympathise with the man she is going to hang and the sole aim in her life becomes providing him with a peaceful death.

For a hangman the most difficult moment is that in which he steps up to cover the face of the face of the condemned man. In that crucial moment, their eyes meet and the last memory that the condemned man gathers for the next world

is of the hangman's face.(134)

Chetana's dream of a man brandishing a large fish chopper and running through the narrow alleys of Kalighat foretold the forthcoming tragic events of her family. Three murders and all by the family members themselves were traumatic even for a hang woman. Phanibushan, who claimed to have killed the criminals only, kills his brother's wife and his own daughter for not conforming to the female role. Niharika was killed for and Shyamli for selling her body even though it was for the medical treatment of her husband. Yet Chetana could assert herself as a hang woman much better than her father. In the end of her storytelling, Chetana had to hang Jatindranath who after his long imprisonment felt greedy for conversation. Chetana goes on telling stories to him and he faces the noose with a laugh. She could love the sinner and he died with her memories of her maternal affection.

Chetana is gifted with an unusual skill in storytelling and all her stories resonate with death. From the Story of Radharaman Grdda Mullick, her first forefather who willingly accepted the profession of hangman in order to kill his rival in love and love and death Each chapter in the novel begins with ghastly descriptions of death, death engulfs Chetana's life not just because it is closely knit in family history, but it is part of her existence as the poor and marginalized.

Deaths of all types, natural and unnatural, murders and suicides are strewn in the novel to make it more evocative. In the chapter which has Thakuma describing deaths by famine in 1943 she says "Every morning we woke up to see the crows and the dogs feed on the bodies of the dead". While being unmoved by suicides and murders in her own family, she cries in her sleep dreaming of famine. Life seems to give her enough reasons to admire the profession of her family which rendered easeful death to the victim. "Everywhere there were corpses, vultures, and wolves...even to feed the hungry was a frightening experience. Once a woman who ate the rice my thakuma served her died in front of her died in front of our eyes -her stomach split open."(143)

Chetana's stories often are filled with magical realism and sprinkling bizarre imagery, she makes her narration swing between fact and fiction. Her description of the illness which made young boys to suffer is one such incident. People who had to flee from famine had their boys dying of a condition with insects coming out of their body. Chetana describes the condition as her own experience and as another TV report. In both cases the teenage boys died of insects coming out of their body. Chetana saw the boy with a row of termites trickling out of his eyes and blue flies coming out of his nostrils and blue flies come out of his ears. The most mundane becomes supernatural in her stories. Deaths open doors towards unsolved mysteries of human existence and

they lead to labyrinths of fact and fiction. The dungeon into which chetana fell had witnessed the last moments of hundreds of men and women Even with its absence of the uncanny elements, the novel fits into the feminine gothic as it revolves around a woman who fell in love with hanging. As Ellen Moers puts it while describing Ann Radcliffe's heroines,

In the power of villain, [Anne Radcliffe's] heroines are forced to do what they could not do alone, whatever their ambitions: scurry up to the top of paste board Alps, spy out exotic vistas, penetrate bandit infested forests. And inside Mrs. Radcliffe's castles her heroines can scuttle miles along corridors, descend into dungeon and explore secret chambers- without chaperone because the Gothic Castle however much in ruins is still an indoor and therefore freely female space.(Moers,126)

Chetana finds her female space in Alipore Central jail where she fell into a dungeon her demonic lover takes her to Sonagachi and the lonely abandoned bungalow with aparajitha wines where she never could have gone on her own .The skill in storytelling and her expertise in making a noose makes her fit into gothic feminine. Death becomes seductive and hanging becomes tempting. The gothic setting is provided by her stories which strangle the readers with their nooses.

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