

Noose around the Noose Maker - A Study of Media-Cannibalism in K R Meera's *Hangwoman*

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Abstract: This paper titled “Noose around the noose maker- A study of Media Cannibalism in K R Meera’s *Hang woman*” explores K R Meera’s striking novel *Hangwoman* in the light of the exploitative sensationalism of the present day Indian media which perceives personal experience merely as a subject of news value. When a series of events serve to turn Chetna- the protagonist, into India’s first officially- appointed hangwoman, she is thrust suddenly into the public eye and undesired media attention. Thrown into a world of politics, bureaucracy and sensation driven media, the mechanics of subjugation surrounds her when she becomes a pawn in the hands of a quintessentially ambitious journalist Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. The predicament of having to deal with the most humiliating exploitation by the man whom she loves and hates at the same time becomes a reflection of the hyper-reality and victimization by the postmodern visual media. In an era where news is consciously created as entertainment, the ways and means of generating news shifts away from concerns of reality and humanity. The novel’s multifaceted portrayal of the way power shapes subjectivity and its insightful detailing of the scope for resistance questions the victimization of people and events by today’s media. This paper is an attempt to study the protagonist’s gritty resistance to the media cannibalism trending in our nation which in itself becomes a questioning of power structures and a revolutionary attempt to assert her identity.

Key words: Sensationalism, Power structures, Patriarchy, Commoditization, Identity crisis.

“I wanted to shatter the reader, that is why I wrote *Hangwoman*”, says K R Meera, one of the most revolutionary voices in contemporary Malayalam literary scene, referring to her novel *Aarachar* (2012). A work which stands apart on account of its strikingly singular story line, the novel was translated into English by J Devika under the title *Hangwoman*. Winner of many prestigious honours including the Kerala Sahitya Academy award, Odakkuzhal award, Vayalar award and the coveted Central Sahitya Academy award, it was also shortlisted for the DSC award for the best novel from South Asia. This paper is an attempt to study the novel in the light of the exploitative sensationalism of present day Indian media, which thoughtlessly perceives personal experience as a mere subject of news value. In a disturbing age of hyper-reality and manipulative commercialism of the postmodern visual media, the seemingly terrifying expression ‘media cannibalism’ would not be an overstatement to refer to the way they feed off on the newsmaker.

The novel set in Bengal unfolds the story of a woman belonging to a family of executioners. The Grddha Mullick family takes pride in the ancient lineage they trace from four hundred years before Christ. They burst with marvellous tales of hangmen and hangings in which the Grddha Mullicks figure as eyewitnesses to the momentous events that have shaped the history of the subcontinent. The very title of the novel points to its central problematic- the executioner’s job which is conventionally carried out

by men is given to a woman. The central female character, the youngest member of the family, twenty two year old Chetna is appointed the first woman executioner in India succeeding her father. As remarked by the author after her attempt to dive deep into the history of Kolkata, about the women whom she encountered “within the decaying tombs in the ancient cemetery of History were the women who had revolted inside and outside their homes, the women who had dreamed of new worlds, the women whose tresses continued to grow long and longer even when their skulls had crumbled to dust” (Meera 434). The protagonist Chetna is a contemporary voice of such thousands who were conveniently forgotten by history.

Chetna’s father, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, a veteran of 451 hangings lives in abject poverty as a result of the decline in death penalties in India. Having to depend on a tiny tea shop attached to their house, he lives in utter despair and boastful dreams of a glorious past. When the offer comes after about twelve years of unemployment, to hang Jatindranath Banerjee, a murder convict he sees it as an opportunity to demand a government job for his daughter. Chetna’s brother Ramdev, has been left in a vegetative state after his limbs were hacked off by the father of one of Phani’s victims seeking vengeance. Phani’s brother, a former political activist scarred by the government’s crackdown during the Emergency, lacks the will or strength to carry out the severe task. Thus a series of events serve to turn Chetna into India’s first officially-appointed hangwoman. Thrust suddenly into the public eye and undesired media attention, Chetna is turned into an instant media sensation and a symbol of Indian womanhood and self-respect. The high sounding epithet turns out to be a mockery of the reality in which she is merely a pawn in the hands of the oppressive father and a quintessentially ambitious lover, a television journalist named Sanjeev Kumar Mitra.

Forced to face a world of social complexities embedded in different power structures, the sheer positioning of the central character in a space fraught with power creates room for a representation of how power negotiations happen in private as well as public lives. Born into a family that has been carrying out the executioner’s job for many centuries, Chetna grows up listening to the family tales which are part of the sordid realities of a past that haunts not just her family but the entire nation. The proficient juxtaposition of the narrative of the history of Kolkata with a family history delineates the intricate politics of identity crisis occurring in a realm where the hyper-reality of postmodern India

coexist with centuries of power formation reflecting the grim realities of modern India. “Like the world outside, the jail too was a man’s world” (Meera 62) comprehends Chetna, who questions the hegemonic monopoly of patriarchy by asserting her individuality in a male dominated society.

Talented at making nooses right from the time she was in her mother’s womb as bragged by her grandmother “that the noose I’d tied even as a foetus was a faultless one” (Meera 3), Chetna becomes capable of making perfect nooses by the age of five. She proves that she was Grddha Mullick’s daughter by trapping the man who tried to molest her at workplace in a flawless noose made with her dupatta. In a society which only accepts the stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object or a procreating device, Chetna takes up the job of the hangwoman challenging the qualification regarding the appointment for the job namely “only males need apply” (Meera 57) thereby subverting popular prefixed notions regarding women’s roles.

Thrown into a world of politics, bureaucracy and sensation driven media, the mechanics of subjugation surrounds Chetna when she becomes a pawn in the hands of the ruthless journalist Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Estimated to be the first hanging happening in India after thirteen years, the striking idea of handing over the job to the old hangman’s daughter is initially suggested by this scheming young reporter of CNC channel. Controversial issues like abolition of death penalty and equality of women are taken up in heated live channel discussions by the ambitious journalist. The ironic predicament of getting into a complex relationship with the selfish Sanjeev Kumar Mitra pushes the helpless Chetna into an entanglement of love and hatred. The series of insults to be faced by Chetna from this profit seeking heartless man starts off with the offensive statement made by him at their first meeting “I want to fuck you hard, even if only once” (Meera 27).

The flourishing of news channels has been a recent phenomenon in our country. The gradual yet rapid shift from a maximum of two news bulletins a day to 24×7 live news channels has drastically transformed the media culture in our nation. Even a cursory acquaintance with the process by which news is ‘generated’ in these channels, would tell one how faithfully it follows the paradigm of the hyper-real digital world which does not even attempt to represent reality. News is consciously created as entertainment. When Chetna is presented in television, the entertainment value lies mainly in two factors. Firstly, she is an important character in the drama surrounding the impending execution. The

uncertainty of the event gives it the excitement and her presence would help in enhancing this excitement. Secondly, the novelty of a woman becoming an executioner would catch the attention of the viewers. Thus the television discourse on the subject of the execution colours it as a 'spectacle' and the life and feelings of the newsmaker Chetna turns out to be a mere tool for achieving the self-interested motives of the mass media.

The heartlessness of today's media culture unwinds itself through the incident of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra trying to click pictures of Chetna's paralysed brother. The tragic victimization and utter helplessness of the prey unfolds itself when Chetna narrates "Ramu da was trying to shield himself by pulling down his brows and tightly squeezing his eyes shut" (Meera 26) because he had no hands to cover his face with. The shocked and frozen Chetna's reaction as she scratches the camera and throws it to the ground becomes a resolute revolt against the blind victimization by present day media persons. Bothered only about exclusives, media has turned out to completely disregard all considerations of humanity and ethics. Even the tragedy of her brother was caused by a clever photographer who had captured Ramu da's picture along with his father captioned "Hangman Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick displaying the noose that he had readied for Amartya Ghosh; in the background, his only son, second year MA student of Literature at New Providence College, Ramdev Grddha Mullick" (Meera 34). The desperate father of Amartya Ghosh hacks Ramdev's limbs in revenge while he was returning from college. It was after this terrible incident that Chetna's father insisted that photographs of his family members should not be published. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra's attempt to make her limbless brother a commodity for his channel exposes the consumeristic mindset that rules the world of contemporary mass media.

Sanjeev Kumar Mitra becomes an embodiment of a section of today's media people whose pseudo-concern for humanity is nothing but a masked endeavour to fish for news. The words of Chetna's father about the aspiring journalist "Looks like a crook, no doubt, but the fellow knows how to make news" (Meera 36) stands testimony to this. His attempts at collecting the history of the Grddha Mullick family by tempting Chetna's father with alcohol and his alluring offer to marry Chetna prove to be deceptive schemes to achieve his selfish motives. "It troubled me that he was taking away the priceless tradition and history of our family from father in return for a few bottles of liquor and a little

cash” (Meera 39), ponders Chetna. Signing the contract which forces her to give a series of interviews regarding the execution, Chetna is made a piece of entertainment in his show, being paid to perform as he commands. Never allowed to voice her opinion, her private space is intruded by the cameras. “Chetna’s time, henceforth, must be exclusively for our channel. She must not speak to other newspapers or TV channels. Wherever she goes, we will go with her...till the eve of the hanging” (Meera 52) proclaims Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and that too “for a decent price” (Meera 53). The alarming depth of media cannibalism unfolds itself when the journalist articulates to the drunk father “..we want your life..your life stories that is” (Meera 52).

The novel also explores the current trend of celebrating media as the saviour of the oppressed and the marginalised. When Chetna’s father praises Sanjeev Kumar Mitra by telling him “The truth is that it is TV channels like yours that give freedom and equality to poor folk like us. No one listened to our stories before. Not anymore.” (Meera 69), he becomes a representative of thousands of illiterate poor in India who earnestly believe that the media can bring a change to their wretched lives. The sad reality is that “television is certainly a convenient tool in the hands of the rich and powerful” (Vilanilam 163) trapping the helpless poor in its tangled web. When news turns out to be business, journalists like Sanjeev Kumar Mitra are worried only about TRP ratings and news value and the realities of everyday life are conveniently forgotten. Operating in an environment where success is measured by bottom-line results, conflicting interests often lead to social responsibility being unheeded. When most news organizations are profit-driven institutions that must make money to survive journalism develops into a profit-making enterprise. The present generation of paid news and sensationalism is contrasted with the old generation’s dilemma when the veteran journalist Manavendra Bose remarks “But our generation simply can’t stomach the idea of buying news” (Meera 93).

The novel concludes with a dramatic climax when Chetna is made to demonstrate the hanging in the studio where a gallows tree and a hangman’s rope are set up by the channel. With the insensitive journalist eagerly focussed on recreating the experience for the viewers, the incident raises relevant ethical questions. Chetna’s seemingly strange act of hanging her tyrannical lover live on screen becomes a wild act of rebellion. The protagonist’s gritty resistance to the media cannibalism trending in our

nation proves to be a revolutionary questioning of power structures and a resolute attempt to assert her identity.

“This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, it can even inspire, but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box” (Meyers 238) said Edward R Murrow pointing to the potential of the then new media of broadcast television in a 1958 speech. The symbiotic connection between good journalism and humanity should never be disregarded. In the context of the power it exercises which can change the world, ethics and respect for humanity becomes a responsibility of mature journalism. The job is a difficult one. But it can be done. And it can be done ethically.

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