



From Subjugation to Resilience: The Role of Myth and Memory in K R Meera's *Hangwoman*

MINU RAJ

Assistant Professor

PG Department of English

Don Bosco College(co-ed) Yelagiri hills

Abstract

Myth and Memory forms an indispensable part of our life. The collected or the preserved memories that get handed over to one generation after another has their own relevance in every period. As Paul Connerton argues our body is a "carrier of memories" and these memories shape us in one or other way. It is unable to separate a human being from his societal surrounding, therefore we can say our mind cannot escape from the mythical stories and from the hold of memories. Human beings everyday survival somewhere has nexus with the memory. There is a great role of the past in the present. In the processes of memory, there occurs psychological transformation within an individual. Through this paper, I will focus upon how a memory (Cultural and Collective) and myths aids in moulding an individual's psyche.

Memory serves many purposes. In the book *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, the trio writers Mieke Bal, Jonathan and Leo Spitzer portrays how cultural memory ties past to the present. Through the act of memorization, history lives in the present. It aids in documenting the past. Through recalling, re-emergence of the bygone things happen and occupies a space in the present. "Neither remnant, document, nor

relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or worse, binds the past to the present and future." writes Mieke Bal. They also deal in their essays the need for memory while encountering difficulties in the present.

Key Words: Myth, Cultural and collective Memory, subjugation, resilience

K.R Meera's protagonist Chetna with the relentless exposure to her grandmother Thakuma's mythical tales brings a transfiguration within her character. When the novel unfurls a Chetna who is simple, naïve and innocent is displayed but as each chapter moves forward, strong traits keep ascending in her demeanour and these "positive rise" happens within her psychology, which has a great influence from the collective memories that her grandmother Thakuma or her family has treasured.

Chetna is born into the family of Grddha Mullicks, who carries the legacy of hanging. Though they have all the financial and societal vicissitudes, the collection of memories the hangmen possess is what makes their lives moving. It's not just the protagonist Chetna, other characters in the story also survive with their cultural memories that become a mode of survival.

We can find that lots of collective memories of Chetna's ancestors led the fierce transformation within her psyche and finally her role in taking up the profession of hanging. From the collection of stories narrated by her grandmother Thakuma, the very powerful saga that mainly pushes her to a hanging profession is of Pingalakeshini's, the first woman in the Grddha family who took up hangman's job.

Pingalakeshini is a woman who first encountered abandonment and betrayal from her husband, then the brutal lecherous physical attack from Tughan Khan who was then the ruler of Bengal, then the onslaught from the hands of the Odisha army, she had to undergo conversions at many times, had to forcefully adopt the concubine roles. Finally, Tughan Khan was defeated by Pingalakeshini with the help of Balban, the ruler of Delhi. As to her wishes, "her craving to be killed" rival Tughan Khan fell before her foot. "A ten-foot-long stake of teakwood, another piece of a teak half as long, an iron hook, some rope and a carpenter" were the things that she requested to Balban. She created gallows of her own. When Balban asked what else she required, she

demanded a Hangman's job. As per Thakuma's memory, Pingalakeshini dispatched a thousand people. Thakuma boasts about the very existence of her hangmen lineage as it is said to exist before the Christ. (11)

Her ancestors "Grddha Mullicks" is known for their "bulging eyes" that reflect the hunger of vultures (5) which depicts the strength of the hangmen. As per Thakuma's knowledge, it is said that the first hangman in their family was Radharaman Mullick. He lived long before the White and Black towns came up. Before Bharat became Bharat, there existed "power and crime and the death penalty". Their lineage is from Kalighat, the place where Devi Sati's right toe fell when Bhagawan Mahavishnu cut the body with his Chakra. (11) From Thakuma's recollections, we find that, none of Chena's ancestors has taken up the hanging profession just for the material gain starting from her ancestor Radhraman Mullick. In the case of Chetna's father Phanibhushan, it was for "fame". Then comes the "power" that drove her grandfather Purushottam Grddha Mullick to the hanging. In the case of Kala Mullick, it was the pleasure he derived from witnessing the death. For Bhisma it was the satisfaction that he derived from performing his "inherited dharma" with full determination. What led Pingalakeshini was her firing "revenge". Finally for Kalicharan Grddha Mullick, who undertook this work is to demonstrate his "aesthetic talents" that moved him to the foot of the gallows. These mighty tales of the great revolutionaries aided Chetna to strengthen her up in the weaker episodes of her life. Chetna has fallen into a family which has executed lakhs of people over generations. They embrace death.

Grdha Mullick has credible existence over this earth. "Our lineage is as old as this land of Bharat...this courage, this strength, this sense of justice, all of it is in our blood," says Phanibhushan Grdha Mullick. Sometimes, this thought of strong lineage helps Chetna to rise from the predicaments she undergoes. Even the British adopted from her ancestors the method of tying the condemned man's arms behind his back. Until then in Britain, the hands were tied in the front so that the convict could pray before his death but the prisoners used that liberty to attack. Then it was her grandfather Kalicharan Grddha Mullick who came up with the merits of tying on the back. The British took from us not just cotton and indigo and opium; they took our local knowledge about death (210) says Thakuma. This kind of powerful narrative makes Chetna rethink her role not just as someone who should confine to the four walls doing the domestic job but much more than that.

The protagonist, Chetna first had to encounter a perverted approach from Maruti Prasad, her master's son when she was working as a proofreader in a press. This incident triggered the strength of Grddha Mullicks within her. When he grabbed through her armpit, she did not encounter any fear or nervousness rather the mighty Pingalakeshini from her Thakuma's tale aroused within her body, mind and actions. Than letting down, she reacted in a feisty manner when she was attacked.

From the very beginning of the text itself, we find that Chetna hardly has a voice of her own. She was merely made into a puppet by her father and her fake lover Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, she was forced to dance as per their whims and fancies. From this subjugated phase, she alters to a powerful lady with the exposure to her cultural reminiscences.

Another influential character that Chetna always revered upon was Annapurana who was the wife of Chetna's ancestor Saubhadra Mullick. Annapurna was an ardent follower of Buddha's faith that led her to abandon her home and children. Society pointed to her with the remark "how could a woman become as heartless as to abandon her family and children to seek happiness just for herself? A woman's nirvana lies in her service to the husband and children". (270) This narrative motivates Chetna to break herself from the conventional ties that pull her back.

Another mythical saga that lifted Chetna is of her ancestor Narottam Grddha Mullick who prepared the dying noose for Muzzafar Khazi Choudhary who wanted to commit suicide by hanging than to kneel before the British. After his death, Choudhury's daughter Faizunnesa became the Choudhurani. When she was conferred with the honours from the British government as per the recommendations of Magistrate Douglas, she was offered with the title of "begum" first. She refuted this title as she said she was already a Begum, if they believe in her competence, she interrogated for the acknowledgement of the title of "nawab." However, when Sahib argued that it is a title for men, Choudhrani interrupted saying that, "That's because women haven't been given a chance to be rulers." Her determination could not help them giving the Nawab title to her. From then, she looked at government affairs, travelled all over the country and went in her veil when she went hunting. In her bed, half the side was unoccupied-it was covered with the pelt of the Bengal tigers she had hunted. It is been said that later she had written an autobiography, troubled by the never-ending war between the woman's body

and the organized religion. (397) We saw Chetna breaking the discourse by taking up the role of "Hangwoman", an area which was dealt with by men just like Faizunnesa acknowledging the title of "Nawab." She identifies herself with Thakuma's words- if the prey who should be running away in terror decides to turn around, raise its head and walk straight back to the predator, that will scare away any beast, no matter how menacing. (323) Here, the beast Sanjeev Kumar went through the same situation when Chetna decides not to fall into his loop of fake love.

Another revolutionary story is of her grandfather Kalicharan and Binodini Dasi. For the first time, Kalicharan met Binodini Dasi in Jamuna Baiji's home who was a great musician. Binodini Das' acting is what that attracted him to her-Like the rope that extends into the cellar after the hanging is over, the veins in his heart trembled and shivered. (218) She was a famous actor in all of Bengal. Though Kalicharan was married and had six daughters, he lost his heart to Binodini, her acting made him surrender. Even on his deathbed, he uttered the last word. "B..b" but whatever he tried to say remained unfulfilled. Binodini Dasi had all hatred towards her mother for pushing her to share a bed with a person who was older than her grandfather when she was just eight years old and he abandons her after using her for just one night. Binodini's mother drops her in Jamuna Baiji to help her with some acting and music so that she can become the concubine of some wealthy man. It was Jamuna Baiji who recognized Binodini's extraordinary acting talent and lifted her to greater heights. At the age of eleven, she turned to a seasoned performer and one among the five pleasure women chosen by Girish Chandra Ghosh. He is the one who brought a revolution in the acting milieu by casting women in the female roles. Her performance pulled the heart of the audience. She was asked by a young zamindar to stop acting but she refutes. She was not ready to give up the stage. Her grandfather also witnessed the arrival of Marwari millionaire Gurumukh Ray who was ready to give as much money if Binodini Dasi turns to be his concubine. When Girish Chandra ran out of money, he asks her to take the role of that concubine. Her giving up to Gurumukh Ray enrages the zamindar and he offers as much money if she gave up acting to which she reacts like-I have made money, yes, but money cannot make me. (222) This infuriates the zamindar and thrusts the sword into her body. But she dies in a proud gesture. At one instance we saw when Chetna was with Sanjeev Kumar in his Bungalow, Binodini Dasi's image sprang up in her mind of sitting upright with her left leg resting on her right knee, dressed

as Chaitanaya in Chaitanyaleela. (28) The sprouting up of these images within her shows how deeply she has taken her Thakuma's narrative into herself.

Through these stories, we can say that Thakuma is recalling cultural memory. In cultural memory, the past is remembered for its substance and style. In a journal of cultural memory, it is said how the past is registered on the distinctive qualities and force of which that must be remembered. There is a conscious invocation of the bygone things for serving different purposes. There remain some materials that are highly registered in our consciousness which becomes difficult for us to forget. "Cultures have memories", is therefore not merely metaphorical, but a reminder that cultures, to do their job, must preserve the past in a form as powerful as 'personal' and intimate recollection. In the novel *Hangwoman*, Memory makes its appearance in the form of revolutionary stories of great Hangmen which is transferred to Chetna by her grandmother Thakuma.

Jacques Le Goff in his book, *History and Memory* describes 'history' as a modern form for the recording of the past, dependent on literacy and the written and the printed word. Through this retrieval of the past, the marginal identities also attain a position.

Memory sometimes appears ambiguous. It will be fragmented, disintegrated and might lose connectivity but though broken these hidden histories helps in the contemporary lives to a great extent.

According to Maurice Halbach, memory is a shifting entity as an individual reconstitutes it in present through "language." He continues arguing that language plays a great role in constructing memory. The collective memories, good or bad of hangmen tradition helped Chetna to turn into an empowered woman. Certain memories are invoked in the present to escape mentally from the deteriorating past. With the continual invocation of memories, there is a collective ability of a people to form a paradigm (Halbwachs Maurice) These "paradigms" can either be positive or negative. Thakuma, constructs a similarly powerful and mighty "paradigm" narrative of hangmen that inspires her granddaughter as well as the following generations.

To conclude, Thakuma, who is an embodiment of memories brings identity to many of the past events. Chetna's transformation into a mighty identity is from her Thakuma's narration of the past which explores the repository of meanings in each narrative. Mythology, though have the tendency to group it as an outdated thing,

the content engrossed in these tales have a significant role in metamorphosing human psychology and therefore, we could see how the cultural memories of Chetna's ancestors moulded her strongly.

Works Cited:

Bal, Mieke, Jonathan V. Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover: Dartmouth College, 2006. Print.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1992. Print

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2.3(1988):274-290. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Jun 2007

Meera, K. R. *Hangwoman*. Haryana: Penguin India Pvt, 2015. Print.

Warrier, Shashi. *Hangman's Journal*. New Delhi: Viking, 2000. Print.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. UK: Routledge, 2016. Print.

