

PATRIARCHY, POWER AND JUSTICE: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST READING OF K.R. MEERA'S *HANGWOMAN*

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Abstract

K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman: Everyone Loves a Good Hanging* (2012) is a landmark novel in Indian literature that confronts the intersections of patriarchy, politics, and state violence. Through the story of Chetna Grddha Mullick, India's first female executioner, the novel examines the burdens of inherited violence, the ethics of capital punishment, and the commodification of women in the media age. This article explores the novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective, drawing on thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Ania Loomba, and Michel Foucault. It argues that *Hangwoman* destabilizes gender hierarchies, critiques the continuity of colonial legal violence, and reimagines female agency in the face of systemic oppression.

Keywords: Capital punishment, gender and power, hangwoman, patriarchy, postcolonial feminism

Introduction

K.R. Meera is one of the most powerful voices in contemporary Indian literature, known for her bold exploration of gender, politics, and morality. Writing originally in Malayalam and widely translated into English, Meera has carved a space for herself as a feminist writer whose works bridge local cultural contexts and global critical debates. *Hangwoman: Everyone Loves a Good Hanging* (2012, English translation 2014) is arguably her most ambitious work, weaving together family history, media spectacle, and political commentary in the story of Chetna Grddha Mullick, a woman who inherits the centuries-old profession of execution from her family.

The novel situates Chetna within multiple overlapping structures of power: patriarchal family traditions, the state's apparatus of capital punishment, and the

commodifying gaze of the media. Through her, Meera raises urgent questions: Can women find agency in a role historically defined by masculine violence? Does the executioner merely reproduce the violence of the state? How does the media exploit female bodies while claiming to celebrate empowerment?

This article argues that *Hangwoman* can be read as a postcolonial feminist text that interrogates three interlinked dimensions: patriarchy and gendered inheritance; the postcolonial state and capital punishment; and media and female agency. By reading *Hangwoman* through postcolonial and feminist theories, we see how Meera destabilizes dominant narratives of justice, challenges the patriarchal nation-state, and gives voice to marginalized women caught in cycles of violence and visibility.

Historical and Cultural Background

The figure of the executioner is deeply tied to India's colonial and postcolonial history. The Grddha Mullick family, around which Meera builds her narrative, is inspired by real executioner families from Bengal who carried out hangings for centuries, both under British rule and in independent India. These families, often marginalized by caste and social stigma, were paradoxically central to the functioning of the colonial justice system.

Capital punishment itself is a contested issue in India. Although rare, executions continue to occur, with legal systems upholding it as the 'rarest of rare' punishment. The persistence of hanging as a method of execution reflects the colonial legacy of British criminal law, which enshrined execution as the ultimate display of state sovereignty. As Ania Loomba observes in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, the structures of colonial governance often persist in postcolonial states, reshaping themselves within new political contexts. By making Chetna the 'first female hangwoman,' Meera stages a radical intervention in this history. A profession marked by hereditary masculinity becomes destabilized when a woman steps into the role. Yet her entry is not celebrated as liberation; instead, it exposes the contradictions of patriarchy, law, and gender in modern India.

Patriarchy and Gender in *Hangwoman*

At the heart of *Hangwoman* lies the theme of patriarchy. Chetna does not choose her role; it is forced upon her by lineage, tradition, and her father's authority. Her father, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, embodies the patriarch who both trains and controls her, claiming legitimacy through a history of executioners stretching back generations. Chetna's 'inheritance' is thus not empowerment but burden—she inherits death as destiny. Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is useful here. Spivak argues that subaltern women are doubly silenced: by colonial power and by indigenous patriarchy. Chetna is similarly silenced, spoken

for by her father, by the media, and by the state. Her role as hangwoman is not framed as her own voice but as a spectacle controlled by others.

Yet Meera complicates this by giving Chetna a narrative voice. Through interior monologues and memories, Chetna reflects on the contradictions of her existence. This narrative space destabilizes patriarchy by allowing the silenced subaltern to 'speak.' The novel also critiques the commodification of women through media. Chetna becomes a sensational figure, her femininity exaggerated by journalists who present her not as a professional but as a novelty—the 'beautiful hangwoman.' Her body is turned into a spectacle, echoing Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. What appears as empowerment—her entry into a male profession—is transformed into objectification. Thus, patriarchy in *Hangwoman* is both traditional (the father's authority, gender roles) and modern (the media's commodifying gaze), showing how women remain trapped in intersecting systems of control.

The Postcolonial State and Capital Punishment

Beyond the family, *Hangwoman* critiques the postcolonial state itself. The figure of the executioner embodies the state's monopoly over life and death. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* explains that executions historically served as spectacles of sovereign power: by killing publicly, the state asserted its authority. In Meera's novel, this logic continues. Although executions are no longer performed publicly, the media reproduces the spectacle by turning Chetna into a national obsession. The transition from colonial to postcolonial India has not dismantled the system of capital punishment but rebranded it under new justifications.

Here, postcolonial theory reminds us of continuities. Colonial law in India institutionalized execution as a way to discipline colonial subjects. After independence, the same laws persist, now under the authority of the Indian state. Loomba's analysis of postcolonialism shows how colonial structures often remain embedded within postcolonial governance, sustaining hierarchies and violence. By placing a woman at the center of this apparatus, Meera highlights the contradictions of modern India: while the state claims progress and democracy, it continues to rely on colonial-era punishment and patriarchal traditions. Chetna becomes the embodiment of this contradiction—both a symbol of modern empowerment and a tool of archaic violence.

Feminist Resistance and Agency

Despite these constraints, *Hangwoman* is not merely a tale of victimhood. Meera also explores how women negotiate and resist patriarchal power. Chetna does not passively accept her fate; she questions the morality of executions, challenges her father's authority, and reflects critically on the spectacle surrounding

her. Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence are useful here. Chetna's role as hangwoman is hybrid—it merges masculine tradition with feminine embodiment, unsettling clear gender binaries. Her presence produces ambivalence: is she a symbol of empowerment or oppression? This ambiguity itself destabilizes patriarchy by refusing fixed meanings.

Feminist resistance in the novel also emerges through storytelling. By narrating her own experiences, Chetna reclaims subjectivity. Literature here becomes a space for the subaltern to speak, challenging Spivak's pessimism. Although mediated by the author, Chetna's voice in the novel breaks silences imposed by patriarchy and the state. At the same time, Meera avoids romanticizing resistance. Chetna's agency is limited, fragile, and often co-opted by larger powers. The novel thus reflects the complexities of feminist struggle in postcolonial contexts, where agency is negotiated within constraints rather than achieved absolutely.

History, Memory, and Narrative

Another important dimension of *Hangwoman* is its engagement with history and memory. The Grddha Mullick family history stretches back centuries, presented as both myth and trauma. Each generation inherits not only the profession of execution but also its stigma, guilt, and marginalization. Chetna's narrative is filled with stories of ancestors, interweaving personal memory with collective history. This layering of narrative reflects what postcolonial theorists call 'counter-history'—a way of telling the past that challenges official histories of the state. While official narratives celebrate justice and law, Chetna's stories expose the violence and human cost of executions. By centering the executioner's family, Meera flips historical focus. Instead of judges, politicians, or criminals, the novel foregrounds those who carry out the state's violence but are themselves marginalized. This perspective disrupts dominant histories, offering what Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies call 'history from below.'

Conclusion

K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman* is a powerful exploration of gender, justice, and violence in postcolonial India. Through Chetna Grddha Mullick, the novel confronts how patriarchy, the state, and the media converge to control women's bodies and voices. At the same time, it creates space for resistance, hybridity, and alternative narratives. A postcolonial feminist reading shows how the novel critiques the persistence of colonial structures—such as capital punishment—while exposing the intersections of gender and power. Drawing on Spivak, Bhabha, Loomba, and Foucault, we see *Hangwoman* as a text that destabilizes dominant discourses and demands attention to subaltern voices. Ultimately, Meera reminds us that justice, in

both colonial and postcolonial contexts, is inseparable from questions of power. By giving voice to the hangwoman, she reclaims a silenced figure and turns her into a site of feminist and political critique.

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