

## Journey Through an Alien World: Portraying Multi-layered Nuances of Patriarchy in K.R Meera's *Hangwoman*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines K.R. Meera's novel Hangwoman (2015), translated into English from Meera (2012), originally written in Malayalam. The text unfolds the patriarchal domination over the social life of women in India. Although the title of the novel indicates it as the story of a female protagonist, her journey unfolds the multi-layered nuances of patriarchy at play in the sub-continental context. It investigates the blurring of boundaries and the constant negotiations between public and private spaces, both of which are controlled by powerful social institutions. Contemporary Indian literature, especially women's writing, offers myriad perspectives of patriarchy that control women's bodies and thoughts. This paper sheds light on the dominant forces of patriarchy in moulding the domestic as well as public worlds and also the cultural influences produced by such domination. The novel fictionalises the life of Chetna Gradha Mullick, the country's first female executioner, and her journey through a typically male-dominated domain. It delves into how Chetna struggles to carve out a place for herself in the larger society while battling against patriarchal encroachment in her private life. Meera's novel also portrays how violence and the possibility of violence constrain and control the actions of women under the present social order. The present paper involves a close textual and thematic analysis of the novel and also explores the feminist discourses on patriarchy to trace how the personal and public selves of women are constantly created and recreated through a complex process of negotiations with and resistance to the dominant power structures.*

*Keywords: Patriarchy; public/private; feminism; violence.; resistance*

### INTRODUCTION

Women's writing in India has a rich history and cultural legacy within a predominantly male literary tradition. As happened in multiple societies, despite their dedication and talent, women's writings were categorically ignored and belittled from the colonial period until a few years back (Tharu & Lalitha, 1991). Women writers across the country have focused on the nuanced reality of being a woman in a predominantly patriarchal society. Contemporary Indian women's fiction as a potential genre offers myriad perceptions of patriarchal norms that control women's bodies and thought processes even in the postcolonial nation-state. In consequence, women writers continue to view their preoccupation mostly as "isolated, solitary activity, often surreptitious, generally unacknowledged and undervalued" (Menon, 2000, p.6). A number of women's writings skilfully portray the subtle and prominent acts of violence committed against women in Indian society, as experienced across classes and regions. The women writers have focused primarily on domestic lives and the intricacies involved therein. Women have very rarely allowed the power of representation to express their issues and concerns in the public sphere, and literature has been

playing a significant role in this regard in its refusal to imitate any monolithic imposition of social values and taboos.

The legacy of women's writing in India has been deeply traced by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their bi-partite volumes *Women's Writing in India* (1991, 1993). They tried to create a separate tradition of Indian women's writing and rewrite literary history from their position as postcolonial feminists. Western feminists tend to homogenise women by universalising patriarchy, which is especially problematic for women living in postcolonial nations like India, where women's subjectivities might vary depending on their local, regional, and national contexts. Chandra Talpade Mohanty rightfully observes that:

“An analysis of the “sexual difference” in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I shall call the third world’ difference” – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries”.

(Mohanty, 1988, p.63)

The ideological construction of a woman in India differs from that of a woman in other supposedly third-world countries. There are variations and disparities even within India. Also, Western feminists tend to reserve selfhood and agency for white women, relegating all other women to the role of “others”. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also identifies a “colonialist move” in the Western feminist scholarships since it “celebrates the heroines, of the First World in a singular and individualist, and collective presence of women elsewhere in a pluralised and inchoate fashion” (1986, p.237). From the perspective of these postcolonial feminists, an independent tradition of Indian women's writing could be established with a distinct literary history. The break from the male cultural grid became particularly evident towards the end of the twentieth century when the novels by Indian women writers made an extremely significant advancement, as in the novels written between 1971 and 1980 when the writer's exclusive focus was on the evolution of the female self (Chatterjee, 1996, as cited in Lau, 2002). Their writings highlight the intricacies of the various familial and other interactions that women encounter every day in India. Post-independence Indian women's fictional works are often criticised for their withdrawal from the public sphere while dealing only with issues related to marriage and motherhood (Rege, 1996, as cited in Lau, 2002). They do not discuss or reflect the political context or systems of the region and nation. Instead, issues like relationships, marriage, childhood, family, tradition, food, and domesticity are largely, prominently, and perhaps even purposefully foregrounded. In women's writings, the trivia is energised by a self-conscious female subject-hood in order to interrogate the microphysics of power. There is also a strong undertone of victimhood, as epitomised by incidents of dowries, forced marriages, widowhood, and the inferior status of women in a very patriarchal society are frequently mentioned till the works written during the neo-liberal policy and the twenty-first century (Lau, 2002). In this context, this paper examines K.R. Meera's (2015) groundbreaking novel *Hangwoman*, translated in English from Malayalam *Aarachaar* by Meera 2012, as a deviation that focuses more on the professional world of the protagonist. The idea of a woman public executioner is a relatively rare phenomenon in a typical Indian scenario but a significant incorporation in the tradition of Indian literature. Making a young woman an executioner is a radical and unusual concept that has never been considered in real life or in creative works since women are viewed as life-givers rather than life-destroyers in Indian society.

The novel *Hangwoman* explores the fictional account of Chetna Gradha Mullick, the country's first female executioner, and her lonesome journey to a male-dominated profession of hanging convicts. The novel is written in the form of a bildungsroman of Chetna as she gradually

grows up combating adverse situations (Vijayan, 2015). The novel, despite being written in Malayalam, narrates the life of a Bengali woman, Chetna, who belongs to the Grddha Mullick family from Kolkata. The family has been mainly preoccupied with the profession of hanging criminals for generations. The physical impairment of the family's only son forces Chetna to take over the family profession of hanging prisoners at a provincial prison, an unprecedented move on the part of the administration, leading the media to portray her as a face of 'women empowerment'. She is even offered the position of Assistant to the State's Chief Hangman just before the hanging of the convict Jyotindranath Banerjee. Despite being a woman, Chetna neatly fits into the position of an executioner, which is contrary to her gender roles. She encounters unusual challenges and becomes a topic of popular culture and the media's sensational discourses. The narrative revolves around how Chetna copes with the changing situation and finds her own self at the end of that journey, as well as how she no longer allows patriarchy to diminish her value as an individual. The narrative is recorded in the form of Chetna's stream of consciousness, as she goes around making 'nooses' around the patriarchal system --- *Hangwoman* shows how from a marginalised position, Chetna redefines herself while confronting a sexual assailant, a controlling father, a pretentious lover, and the hypocritical media culture of the contemporary India. She frequently employs her innate talent to make nooses as a form of defense against harassment. She stands out for her powerful physique and skill in creating a swift and lethal noose out of any piece of clothing. As the first female executioner in India, Chetna undertakes the enormous challenge of trying to be herself in a domain that is governed by men. Her journey offers an understanding of the multi-layered nuances of patriarchy at play and how the idea of personal and familiar space is perceived, codified, and theorised. The text illustrates the complex othering that exists in Indian society and also highlights the gender and class discriminations that exist in the rungs of this society. The novel also brings political or controversial issues pertaining to the relevance of the death sentence in modern civil society into consideration. The way Meera addresses the subtleties of patriarchy and a woman's reaction to the violence perpetrated on her body is evident throughout the novel, and the novel's narrative contributes centrally to the contemporary feminist discourse.

## OBJECTIVES

The rationale for this study derives from locating an existing gap in academic research on the issues that fall outside the discourses on marriage and motherhood in relation to contemporary women's writings in India. Apart from a few studies, there has rarely been any research dealing with the patriarchal overtones in various social institutions that affect multifarious women's roles in different corners of Indian society and fictional recreations of them as unconventional tropes of conjugal discourses. The novel *Hangwoman* has also received scholarly attention, most of which treats the novel as a narrative of evolving feminine subjectivity. A research gap can be located in the existing critical works, as they fail to read the novel as a nuanced portrayal of the patriarchal penetration into women's ambivalent position when they step outside the conjugal life. This paper attempts to foreground how violence and the possibility of violence in the domestic sphere constrain and control the actions of women in the public sphere and their resistance or counter-strategies against this violence. This critical reading of K. R. Meera's novel analyses patriarchal violence through the lens of everyday, intimate or personal, gendered or domesticated. The forms of violence focused on in the discussed text cannot simply be explained as 'private' because, though certainly intimate, this experience is not weaned away from a greater public narrative.

The paper thus attempts to delve deep into the critique of patriarchal discourse presented in *Hangwoman* that traces how the personal space of a woman overlaps with the public. The current project seeks to achieve three distinct aims through the analysis of this novel: (1) to shed light on dominant forces of patriarchy in moulding the domestic as well as public worlds and also the cultural influences produced by such domination; (2) to investigate how the constant negotiations between public and private spaces are controlled by powerful social institutions like family, marriage and media in the sub-continental context; (3) to explore how an individual woman asserts her agency by refusing to fully connect with an assigned subject position. Secondary sources are mostly used to meet the aims and objectives. The research exclusively considers the English translation of the novel by J. Devika as its primary source to unfold the multi-layered patriarchal discourses that dominate the social life of women in India. The argument here will be underpinned by the available theories on patriarchy, power and resistance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The various available studies on *Hangwoman* are analysed and interpreted to find out areas where a research gap exists. Most of the research conducted on *Hangwoman* concentrates on issues like the search for identity, evolved femininity, female subjectivity, and existentialism. Some other studies concentrate on the feminist perspective. Vidhya Vijayan (2015), in one of her studies, concentrates on Chetna's journey towards self-realisation by combating different kinds of struggles that are narrated in the novel. The research considers the novel a bildungsroman and explores how the protagonist journeys through an alien professional world, mostly governed by men. By battling the existing norms of the conventional society, Chetna attempts to break the series of oppression of women by patriarchal chauvinism, which is thoroughly discussed in the novel.

The research explicitly explores how Chetna challenges the phallogocentric order of the universe, and in the end, she becomes the representative figure of women's emancipation. KG H and Muraleedharan S (2019), on the other hand, attempt to redefine gender and explore a new area of womanhood by analysing the novel. Their research also talks about a woman's heightened journey from artificial femininity to evolving as herself. Taking this novel as a base, an attempt is made to redefine gender roles. The research has borrowed ideas from gender theories to trace the evolution of the gendered self. They have done a qualitative analysis to demonstrate how gender roles function in the subcontinental milieu.

They also employed a semiotic analysis method to study the undercurrent of language in order to understand the novel. Hari M.G. (2017), in his research, explores the negotiation of identity in the novel through the light of Michael Foucault's deliberations on power, subjectivity and critique. Using the theoretical foundation of Foucault, Hari analyses the novel's multi-layered construction of how authority moulds subjectivity and its delineation of opportunities for resistance. The protagonist's resistance is distinguished by her inventiveness in manipulating the systems of power to reshape her identity. Identity is formed by the power that exists. Chetna's transformation into a powerful individual reiterates the oppression she faces in society. The choices she adopts create space for herself where she can imagine her subjectivity. The study also examines the hypocrisy of post-modern visual media in practice. In quite a similar manner, Meera Prasannan and Deepthi Mohan (2022) also read the novel under the light of Foucault's concept of power and how power creates room for resistance. A. Mary (2022), in her analysis of the novel, examines how a woman's conflicted identity is tied together with the thread of love, creating a new

personality even after she experiences the trauma of being forced to set herself free from conventional gender norms. Here, the entire study has been guided by the theories related to cultural studies, which resulted in identifying how the protagonist recreates her new self and becomes the first female executioner of the country. Research has also been conducted on how the novel can be read as a critique of the state's bio-political control (Pandey, 2020). Pandey's study looks at the ways in which the protagonist of the novel constructs her own genealogy of female ancestors. It presents a distinct ethics of the state mechanism's portrayal of gender, nationhood, and biopolitical goals. Reshma Jose's (2019) study explores *Hangwoman* in light of the exploitative sensationalism of contemporary Indian media. The researcher examines Chetna's persistent opposition to the media cannibalism that is currently popular in the nation. In short, her study challenges established power systems and the protagonist's reaction to them while attempting to assert a woman's individuality.

The article raises concern about the ethics, humanism, and accountability of responsible journalism. Another study attempts to investigate and analyse the novel *Hangwoman* as a narrative that challenges the dominant notion of masculinity and the myth related to female inferiority (Chandnani, 2021). It studies how women intervene in a male-dominated world while destroying male chauvinism and patriarchal shackles. A recent study on various novels by K.R. Meera, Rekha K.G., and Manjula K.T. (2022) separately investigated *Hangwoman* and identified that lack of state support creates room for violence and injustice. The research's primary conclusion is that the country's policy and the policymakers preserve the interests of the patriarchy. Their research also includes a discussion of how women's vulnerability under such a framework contributes to the disorder that exists in the entire country. In conclusion, after reviewing all these recent researches, this study identifies the absence of readings of the novel as a nuanced portrayal of public as well as private patriarchies. This current study aspires to investigate how the professional as well as personal space of a woman are constantly being negotiated in the hands of dominant patriarchal institutions and how an individual encounters such domination and carves out a space of her own.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research work tries to frame a comprehensive theoretical framework from myriad theories available on patriarchy in order to understand how gender roles propagated by traditional social institutions can be problematised. The concept of patriarchy has been an important tool for the feminist understanding of society. Different models of patriarchy have existed in the world in different times, different cultures and places. Drawing theoretical insight from Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchy (1989, 1990), this paper aims to view patriarchy not only as a structured system but also as a process continuously evolving and devolving through social, cultural, and political practices. According to these theoretical perspectives, patriarchy is a system of hierarchical power relations in which men possess exclusive control over women. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as a system of interrelated social structures through which men exploit women (Walby, 1990). She provides a perspective on theorising patriarchy in a way that articulates two different types of patriarchy, which she identifies as "private patriarchy" and "public patriarchy", that are visible in a number of societal structures by examining and evaluating various theoretical approaches to patriarchy.



"Private patriarchy is the oppression of women that keeps them out of the workforce and confines them to unpaid domestic work. In contrast, "public patriarchy" allows women access to both the public and private spheres, but this access is viewed as inferior to that of their male counterparts, and women are still viewed as an inferior group, always subordinate to men (Walby, 1990). It also symbolises a system in which men, especially the father or the head of the household, exercise control over all the other family members, properties, economic resources, and decision-making processes (Bhasin & Khan, 1999). It is an oppressive system that denies women's human rights and upholds men's dominance over them. In a patriarchal society, due to their sex, women experience systematic social injustice and patriarchy, on the other hand, has an impact on every facet of society, including gender, caste, class, the economy, and polity. In *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Walby identifies patriarchy as structural oppression where six different relatively autonomous structures function together to maintain dominance. These six structures can be identified as "the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relation in paid work, patriarchal relation in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions" (Walby, 1990, p.18).

Indian society is also predominantly patriarchal, but there are several other factors that operate and interplay with the factors identified by Sylvia Walby. Western Feminist ideas cannot fully theorise Indian realities where caste and religion have important economic implications, and the patriarchal system dominates even the family space. Therefore, the research work relies significantly on Bhasin K (1991,1993,1996) and other Indian feminist scholars, such as Uma Chakravarti (1993) and Kumkum Sangari (1993), for theorising the multi-layered patriarchal discourse in India. According to Bhasin K, patriarchy symbolises a system in which men, particularly the father of the household, exercise control over all family members, properties, economic resources, and decision-making processes (Bhasin & Khan, 1999). However, the definition of patriarchy evolves to encompass a broader scope. This term has commonly been used to refer to power dynamics between men and women, as well as the various systems exerting control over women (Bhasin, 1993). While theorising the patriarchal discourse in India, Bhasin K (1993) identifies the institution of family, a basic unit of society, as "the most patriarchal". It serves as a bridge between private and public culture and imposes order and conformity in situations where political or other institutions are ineffective or insufficient. It acts as an agent of the patriarchal state that ensures conformity through its family heads. It is governed by the hierarchical power structure in which man is superior and dominant, and woman is inferior and subordinate (Bhasin, 1993).

Towards the final section, while exploring how the protagonist reclaims her subjectivity, the present research work aligns with Foucault's notion of power because of the novel's complex portrayal of dominance and surveillance. According to Foucault, the generative nature of power creates room for resistance, and an individual exercises agency by actively participating in the intricate web of power. Foucault identifies power as a form of extensive control exercised through a complex system of discourse. According to him, every relationship has a unique power dynamic. As an individual is engaged in several relationships, this always leads to multiple power negotiations, which, as a result, produce multiple subject positions. However, this new power structure relies on bodies, and it is constantly negotiated by means of surveillance. *Hangwoman* stands out for its detailed depiction of a marginalised woman's life and her struggle against the patriarchal oppression that she endures at home and in the outside world. The way she combats a controlling father and dominating lover, as well as all the subjugation offered by traditional patriarchal institutions like marriage and media, pervades throughout the novel. The physics of

power that restricts subjectivity is, therefore, one of the central issues of the novel. These elements of the story make it appropriate to read it while considering the aforementioned theoretical framework.

### ‘HOME’ AS A CONSTRAINT: FAMILY AS A ‘PATRIARCHAL UNIT WITHIN A PATRIARCHAL WHOLE’

According to various studies, the majority of societal institutions are patriarchal. A patriarchal system and structure are supported by the family, religion, media, and law. This tightly knit and deeply ingrained institution gives patriarchy the appearance of invincibility and naturalness (Bhasin, 2017). The patriarchal system serves as the foundation of the feminist approach since it displays the inferiority and disadvantage of women in social institutions. In general, patriarchy refers to the organisation of society into family units where fathers serve as the head of the home. Fathers in these families are in charge of ensuring the well-being of the household. This position in the family, in turn, gives fathers authority over their families (Parker & Reckdenwald, 2008). Through private patriarchy, women are oppressed and controlled by some individual patriarchs (Walby, 1990).

In the private space, patriarchy is embodied by an individual, who is a man, in his position as husband or father, who is the direct oppressor and beneficiary, more or less directly ensuring the subordination of women (Walby, 1990). Reinterring Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Bhasin K (1993) also identifies the family as the ‘most patriarchal’ that has some prototypical roles. Traditionally, patriarchy has given the father total ownership over wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and control. Classically, as head of the family, the father is both the begetter and owner in which kinship is property (Millet, 1971). In her book *Understanding Gender* (2003), Kamla Bhasin also claims that the origin of patriarchy can be traced back to the large household of the patriarch, which included women, younger men, children, slaves, and domestic servants under the control of this dominant male. In the family, a male is seen as the head of the household and has authority not only over sexuality, labour, and reproduction but also over the movement of women. Family being structured with power relations poses men as ‘superior and dominant’ and women as ‘inferior and subordinate’. Bhasin rightly observes that.

The family is also important for socialising the next generation in patriarchal values. It is within the family that we learn the first lessons in hierarchy, subordination, and discrimination. Boys learn to assert and dominate, and girls to submit to expect unequal treatment. Again, although the extent and nature of male control may differ in different families, it is never absent.

(1993, p.9)

In *Hangwoman*, Chetna's father, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, assumes the role of the head of the household, mirroring the typical Indian patriarchal family structure. In the entire family, only Phanibhushan has the authority to make important decisions by virtue of being the ‘father’. Phanibhushan joins hands with the media in order to get a government job as the state hangwoman for his daughter without even informing her. He also strikes a deal with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, a member of the media, requiring her to participate in a series of interviews about the impending execution. He even tries to control her productivity both within the household and outside by directing her every action: "It is I who know what's wrong and what's right. Better for everyone to accept that — do what I say and move on" (Meera, 2015, p.204). He even attempts to restrict her movement and speech when he says, "Chetu, you will not step out of the house from now without my permission. You will not speak to anyone without my knowledge" (Meera, 2015,

p.205). Sylvia Walby's understanding of 'private patriarchy' explains the situation, where she denotes household production, which is the main site of women's oppression:

Public patriarchy is based principally on public sites such as employment and the state...In private patriarchy, the expropriation of women's labour takes place primarily by individual patriarchs within the household, while in the public form, it is more collective appropriation. In private patriarchy, the principle patriarchal strategy is exclusionary; in the public, it is segregationist and subordinatE.

(Walby, 1990, p.177)

There is a material basis for patriarchy. Men materially benefit from patriarchy because they have control over and exploitation of women's labour, and they also gain materially from the subjection of women (Bhasin, 1993). In order to gain material benefits, Phanibhushan exposes his daughter to a world of politics, bureaucracy, and sensationalist media in the name of money and power. He wants to capitalise on Chetana's sudden fame by getting as much money as he can.

Phanibhushan acts as a patriarchal agent who ensures his entire family adheres to all societal norms. In order to do that, he frequently exercises violence or force. Using violence to maintain dominance in the patriarchal family system is an age-old practice in Indian society. In this regard, Uthara Soman, an Indian feminist scholar, writes:

Patriarchal norms (including gender inequality and violence against women) are maintained through a variety of ways which includes upbringing (reflecting the expectations of parents, peers, self), discrimination (in hiring, promotions, giving credit, giving opportunities etc.), social arrangements (such as family, church, competition, hierarchal occupations, gender division of labour etc.), force (rape, battering, harassment), ... and laws and policies (which lead to exclusion from occupations, unequal wages, age discrimination, etc.).

(Soman, 2009, p. 258)

Sylvia Walby (1990) also observes that male assault against females has every aspect of the social structure one would expect, and it cannot be understood outside of an understanding of the patriarchal social structure. In a country like India, violence is intricately connected with cultural discourse. Here, it is socially acceptable for kinsmen to use violence against women in order to maintain their domination. Uma Chakravarty identifies it as 'one of the mechanisms of control' the actions of women: "The authority of male kinsmen is backed by the potential right to use coercion and physical chastisement against women who violate the codes laid down for them" (2018, p.73). Kalpana Kannabiran and Ritu Menon also correlate patriarchy and violence and explain how patriarchy grants men to exercise violence for whatever purpose they desire:

Patriarchal power and privilege operate through socially and culturally sanctioned institutions and structures that tacitly endorse the practice of violence in order to remain dominant. Males of all castes and classes dominate and subjugate their women, even though they themselves may be oppressed by men (and women) of higher castes and classes. The interlocking or dovetailing of public and private patriarchies means that women experience linked or connected forms of violence that extend from the house to the street and onto the battlefield.

(Soman, 2009, p. 23)

In *Hangwoman*, whenever Chetna tries to assert her own individuality, Phanibhushan controls that through violence or threat of violence: "Disobedient hussy! She's stuffed with pride! I'll kick her out if she doesn't do what I say! Then she will have neither this family nor this house!" (Meera, 2015, p.294). The Indian value system grants the father unquestionable authority, and Phanibhushan also harbours this notion and expects the same from his children: "You have become



swollen-headed enough to challenge your father now! I have never questioned my father. Father means the father of the world — Bhagwan Mahadev. God does not forgive those who don't respect their father" (Meera, 2015, p.231). Being the ultimate symbol of the patriarchal value system, Phanibhusan not only commodifies his daughter's personal space but also uses his son's disability as a pawn to increase his own financial gain. When the hanging of the convict Jyotindranath Banerjee is postponed, and the country's media shifts its attention from Chetna, Phanibhushan objectifies his physically challenged son Ramdev, who is on his deathbed in order to retain the public attention. Thus, in a society like India, where disability and poverty have the capacity to make money, domestic space is politicised very easily.

*Hangwoman* narrates multiple layers of patriarchal adjustments. Besides Chetna and Ramdev, the other family members also fall prey to patriarchal subjugation within the private as well as public world. Chetna's mother experiences subjugation on multiple levels – sometimes, the violence comes from her husband, sometimes from the brother-in-law, and there are also instances when she faces abuse from her mother-in-law. Violence and hostility in men are justified in a patriarchal society as traits of masculinity. In the household, men are supposed to provide for and look after the women and kids. They, therefore, see it as their responsibility to control the members of the family in order to preserve the reputation of the family or community. Jasbir Jain quite interestingly writes:

Women are not the only ones to be oppressed by it [patriarchy]: all marginalised categories, whether men or women, get caught in its web of authority. And its arms extend to almost every field-philosophy, law, governance, society itself, and the more modestly constructed family.

(2014, p.13)

Phanibhushan always assumes his brother is weak and questions his masculinity because, in a patriarchal society where men are expected to uphold traditional masculinity, Phanibhushan's brother possesses a sensitive bent of mind. He suffers from stereotyping that emerges out of a patriarchal culture and patriarchal expectations. Though he once was a political activist, he never qualified for the job of chief hangman; he remained only an assistant to his hangman elder brother. This patriarchal system, which relies on violence and dominance to thrive, is as destructive to males, like Chetna's Kaku, since it installs in them a toxic conscience, kills their emotional sensitivity, and raises them in a more animalistic than human manner: "Whenever I go to the foot of the gallows, I am filled with fear about myself. What am I doing? Protecting or punishing?" (Meera, 2015, p.312) Kamala Bhasin explains this as a 'disadvantage' of patriarchy:

But in another sense, men are also disadvantaged by patriarchy. Like women, they are pushed into stereotypes and into playing certain roles, and they are expected to behave in a particular way, whether they want to or not. They, too, are obliged to fulfil social and other obligations that require them to function in a specific way. Men who are gentle and unaggressive are harassed and mocked for being sissies; those who deal on equal terms with their wives are 'hen-pecked'.

(1993, p. 12)

Chetna's grandmother also consistently preaches patriarchal notions and believes that women should make sacrifices for their families. She exploits her daughters-in-law by saying women are things to adjust to and subdue, but men have always been the ones in the position to dominate. She supports men visiting brothels as a sign of masculinity. Women like her become a part of this exploitative patriarchal system, as she has internalised its values and cooperated with the system to prevail within the domestic sphere. Gerda Lerner tries to find out reasons for such cooperation and explains:

This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination, educational deprivation, the denial to women of knowledge of their history, the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women...a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance.

(1986, p. 217)

Indian feminist critic Kumkum Sangari (1993) also observes how patriarchy functions through both coercion and consent. As she has noted, when women give their consent, it should not be interpreted as acceptance to only patriarchal ideals, practises, and structures because 'the patriarchies they are subjected to are simultaneously located in specific modes of production, in class structures and in particular forms of caste-class inequality' (Sangari, 1993, p.114). She further observes:

[t]he consensual, contractual elements combine agential power with subjection for women and produce a mixture of consent and resentment. ... Nor is there anything straightforward about the element of consent since it may rest on a series of factors ranging from wide social consensualities, economic dependence, social pressures congealed into structural necessities or dispersed as moral systems, the pull of affective relationships and the perceived legitimacy of the offer to protect women from the patriarchal violence of other individuals or groups.

(Sangari, 1993, p.114)

So, it is clear that women play an equally important role in the maintenance and preservation of patriarchal forces. Chetna's grandmother, therefore, clings to the patriarchal value system in order to make sure her entire family adheres to the patriarchal norms.

#### THE PATRIARCHAL TRAP OF MARRIAGE: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHETNA AND SANJEEV KUMAR MITRA

Marriage is a social and legal arrangement where two people, frequently a man and a woman, agree to live together. The law, religion, culture, and traditions of the community have laws governing this union (Brake, 2016). Society controls every individual through the public institution of ritualised marriage, which has its own agenda of establishing a household, entering into sex relations, procreating and providing care for the children (Mazumdar, 1966). In this way, the traditional marriage system becomes one of the primary tools of patriarchy to exercise control and power over every individual. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and Chetna are not married in *Hangwoman*, but they maintain a romantic relationship in the sense that he proposed to her father to marry her. Despite the fact that Chetna initially surrenders to this proposal, in the end, she reclaims her own agency. Although romantic relationships are celebrated as the pinnacle of personal freedom and assertion of choice, they are nonetheless dictated by norms and expectations of marriage (Bhandari, 2017). Romantic relationships, too, attempt to reinforce traditional codes and conduct of femininity on wives and partners. Carole Pateman, in her book *The Sexual Contract* (1988), defines marriage as an ongoing social arrangement between the sexes in which a wife submits to her husband in exchange for protection. Men benefit materially and psychologically from that submission. Marriage and other intimate relationships have traditionally been viewed as impenetrable personal domains within the public institution that serve the common good and the interests of society as a whole, as well as individuals. The emphasis on personal fulfilment and happiness as a priority recognises it as a private affair that occurs in the domestic spheres of two

individuals. Although the notion of arranged marriage is still the norm in modern India, romantic relationships before marriage have also found their place in contemporary social discourse.

In *Hangwoman*, Chetna and Sajeev Kumar Mitra share an intimate relationship which is sanctioned in the name of marriage. Here, Meera demonstrates how patriarchy encroaches on Chetna's personal space by the trap of marriage and then ultimately commodifies that space since marriage is believed to provide social protection for a woman. After being appointed as the first female executioner of the nation, the country's media houses started seeing her potential enough to make money for them. As a result, she is transformed into a media sensation overnight. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, the media executive, immediately grabs this opportunity and attempts to exploit Chetna for his own professional agenda. He proposes to marry her in front of her father, who is also trying to make the best of the situation. In Indian society, where marriage ensures social security, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra's proposal is readily accepted by Chetna's father. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra uses marriage as a strategy to exert control over Chetna's movements and expose her private life. He makes a contract with her father, according to which Chetna will appear on his channel for a series of interviews before the execution of Jatindranath Banerjee. Though initially Chetna feels attracted towards Sanjeev Kumar Mitra when he attempts to molest her, the attraction changes into aversion: "Somehow I felt that he had been attacking my body all that while in some horrible manner. I found it hard to deal with the secrets of my body with filthy looks and dirty words, secrets which I kept safe for someone who would desire and respect me deeply." (Meera, 2015, p.41). Chetna is also aware of the fact that he uses marriage as a pawn in order to get access to her body: "... He does not really love me, I was convinced. His concern and tenderness, the glimmer of love in his green eyes --- they are all mere put-ons, I grieve" (Meera, 2015, p.228). On their first encounter, he grabs her and threatens her with his desire to "fuck her hard" (Meera, 2015, p.96). Therefore, throughout the novel, the micro-physics of power is exercised in gender relations both in private and public spheres. In the disguise of a lover, an intimate partner, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, violates her professional space, which should have been her personal space only. Though earlier Chetna was unable to prevent herself from falling prey to Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, at the end of the novel, she is able to show her resistance. She gains control of her public as well as private life gradually and finds her hypocritical lover powerless in front of her bold confrontations:

The training he had received from this world as a man reminded him that sex was the obvious outcome in such a situation. But he was afraid to take a woman who had walked into his bedroom of her own free will.  
(Meera, 2015, p. 328)

#### PATRIARCHY AND MEDIA: THE CASE OF *HANGWOMAN*

The media have a significant impact on society because they educate and enlighten their viewers about the events and issues that are happening in and around them. As a result, the media are an integral aspect of interpersonal interactions and a crucial instrument for communication because they are so important for educating the common masses. Additionally, the media has significantly influenced and modified nations and cultures. But as feminists' discontent with the media grows, a new perspective on how women are portrayed in the media and how the media itself views women has emerged. Kamla Bhasin writes:

Media are very important tools in the hands of upper-class, upper-caste men to propagate class and gender ideology. From films and television to magazines, newspapers, and radio, the portrayal of women is stereotypical and distorted. Messages about male superiority and female inferiority are repeated constantly; violence against women is rampant, especially in films. As with other sectors, women are highly under-represented in the media and professionally, and biases in reporting coverage, advertising and messaging are still very sexist.

(1993, p. 14)

Present-day Indian media perceives personal experience merely as a subject of news value and leaves no scope to expose that 'valuable' personal space in the public forum. Media, being one of the major instruments of patriarchy operating in public, plays an important role in selling the privacy of human individuals, owing to the fact that public patriarchy subordinates women in all cities and does not only exclude them from some of them (Walby, 1990). In an interview with Reva Yunus, Uma Chakravarty also critiqued the media as 'the least idealistic segment of our society' as "they only show what the middle and upper-middle classes want to see, ... these sections do not actually care about all the other people left down below" (2018, p.61). In the contemporary cultural discourse in India, the growth of news channels is a relatively recent phenomenon where news is consciously being created as entertainment, which Baudrillard notes as 'hyperreality'. According to him, representations supersede reality instead of representing it.

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for real itself; that is, an operation to determine every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes... a hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.

(1988, p. 172)

The knowledge provided by the media is a sign rather than a reality for people to consume. Just like hyperreality, it conceals the dearth of reality. Hyperreality, by shifting the human concern, ends up participating in the dehumanisation of the oppressed.

Chetna in *Hangwoman* is unexpectedly thrown into the public eye and unwanted media attention when a sequence of circumstances conspires for her to make India's first officially appointed hangwoman. Thrown suddenly into a world of celebrity, Chetna finds her private life under the supervision of sound, camera, and action. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and his channel mercilessly intrude on Chetna's domestic space and manipulate every member of her family. Her personal space is recurrently violated and destroyed by making it public through constant surveillance. Even her opinions of herself are promoted in media coverage, and after losing her own agency, she starts seeing herself through the lens of the media. Kumkum Roy (2010) identifies this as a politics of disillusionment as it fulfils and preserves the corporate interest. Patriarchal media identifies the visual worth of Chetna and pitilessly commodifies it as vivid, visual entertainment: "Is she an ordinary woman now? It's the first time in the whole world that a woman's been appointed an executioner. She is a symbol of strength and self-respect to the whole world now..." (Meera, 2015, p.71). Every appearance of hers contributes to the construction of the narrative around the impending execution as a patriarchal institution. The media articulates the masculine bias towards women by representing Chetna only as a biological category while ignoring her critical role in challenging the existing social order. Using the public gaze finally reinforces the authority instead of countering it.

## OVERTURNING PATRIARCHAL VALUES: CHETNA'S RECONSTRUCTION OF HER OWN SUBJECTIVITY

Chetna's character is particularly remarkable because, despite all of the oppression she experiences, she is able to keep herself from being completely submissive and has the strength to rebel. By refusing to fully connect with the assigned subject position, she asserts her agency. When faced with multiple forms of subjugation, Chetna shows remarkable resistance. She frequently violates the rules of power politics in an effort to regain her own agency. In order to recreate her own identity, she actively engages in the mechanics of power that tangles her (Hari M.G., 2017). Power, as it is portrayed in *Hangwoman*, is both a force that tries to build identities and a constructive system that allows for identity remoulding. The novel aligns with Foucault's theories on power because of its complex portrayal of dominance and surveillance. According to Foucault, the generative nature of power creates room for resistance, and an individual exercises agency by actively participating in the intricate web of power. He identifies power as a form of control exercised through a complex system of discourse: "Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application." (Foucault, 1978, p.80). This new power structure relies on bodies, and it is constantly negotiated by means of surveillance. This subtle nature of power discourse is prevalent throughout the narrative layers of *Hangwoman*. Chetna is never explicitly constrained by power in the novel, but she is constantly forced into a position of subordination by the discourses that surround her. She exhibits defiance and lack of fear of power in her reactions towards the end of the novel while confronting Sanjeev Kumar Mitra:

I wanted to laugh. He looked at me incredulously. I liked his face at that moment. There is great bliss--- even in these days of democracy --- in receiving devotion, even if it is expressed with a turned face, and in receiving worship, even if it is performed with the left hand.

(Meera, 2015, p. 329)

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault writes that where there is power, there is always a possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1978). Where there is no opposition, according to Foucault, there is actually no power relationship. According to him, human subjectivity is shaped by power structures, and the skill of navigating these structures is called "critique" (Foucault, What is Critique? 1997, p. 47). In a society where women are only ever seen as weak, defenceless, sexual objects, or reproductive devices, Chetna shows her autonomy by critiquing the power structure. In a male-dominated society where her personal space is continuously compromised, she builds a different kind of relationship with herself and the people around her. Her response to power constitutes her resistance as she refuses to submit to the dominant power discourse. Though initially, she is strangled by the power around her, in the end, she makes an effort to uphold her own principles. She refuses to submit to the established power discourse, and her refusal can be read as her critique: "I cannot submit to the will of the father or the lover or husband or children to come in the future" (Meera, 2015, p.276). However, towards the end of the novel, she pulls the lever to hang convict Jatindranath Banerjee, who becomes the first hangwoman in the country. But pulling the lever is quite significant as she imagines all the energy is leaving her body at that moment. She performs a perfect hanging without causing any harm to the convict, but the act leaves her utterly horrified, demanding she take decisive action to lessen the destructive impulse of death in her life. Thus, Pulling the lever can be interpreted as an action to eradicate all patriarchal stereotypes about her gender roles.



## CONCLUSION

K.R. Meera's fictional depiction of women's resistance against patriarchal violence rests on the nuanced interaction between the oppressive societal environment and the oppressive familial world. As the novel portrays multiple layers of patriarchal subjugation, it can be read as a narrative that unfolds the changing forms of patriarchal discourses that dominate the social life of women in India. It investigates the overlapping and blurring of boundaries and the constant negotiations between public and private spaces, which are controlled by powerful social institutions. It closely portrays how Chetna and the other family members struggle against the structural oppression that is meted out to them largely through their own family and the external world. *Hangwoman* shows how women and younger family members as a group are not only materially oppressed through violence or the threat of violence but also constantly live in fear of greater harm in such a patriarchal scenario. This paper explores the conventional discourse around patriarchy by exploring familial relationships and two major patriarchal institutions, family, marriage and media, in shaping the private as well as the public life of women. It traces Chetna's negotiation with the ordeals of life and shows how, with each challenge, she evolves. The novel ends with a remarkable note, as Mr Sanjeev Kumar Mitra invites Chetna to mock the hanging in the television show he hosts. This invitation gives Chetna a scope for resistance as she lures him into playing the role of the victim, only to tighten the noose around him. This act of Chetna can be read as the ultimate celebration of an individual's strength and resistance.

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