Evoking the Female Prowess: A Journey towards Self Realisation in K. R. Meera’s Aarachar

Vidhya Vijayan
Guest Lecturer
N. S. S. Hindu College
Changanacherry
Kottayam, Kerala
India

Abstract
K.R.Meera’s Aarachar explores the life of strong female character Chetna Grddha Mullick. The novel’s protagonist is the first woman executioner in India. Aarachar is a powerful female epic which narrates the story of India’s first successful hang woman. Beavoir’s statement “one is not born a woman; but becomes one” is very much relevant in the reading of Aarachar. Though the present patriarchal society nullifies the role of female, the women try their best in coming to the forefront by retaliating against the patriarchal norm. Women’s rage towards suppression is evident in the protagonist Chetna. By surpassing the conventional orthodoxy and ritualistic practices, Chetna wins in breaking up the potential oppression of female by the male chauvinists. Her journey towards self realisation by combating different kinds of struggles is narrated in the novel.
Research Paper:
K.R. Meera’s *Aarachar* presents a piquant mapping of Calcutta, explores the life of a powerful female character and leads the reader into the psyche of Chetna GRDDHA MULLICK, the hang woman. It has been translated into English as *Hang woman* by J.L. Devika. By presenting a number of strong female characters, Meera makes an attempt to bring out the various elements and inspiring qualities that shaped the memorializing character Chetna. The novel’s protagonist is the first woman executioner in India. The novelist’s spectacular and powerful imagination transforms the story of Chetna’s life into a powerful female epic.

A female becomes a woman gender wise, through a process of phallocentric social accreditation. Simon De Beauvoir’s statement regarding women is very much pertinent in the reading of the *Hang woman*. As she puts it in *The Second Sex* one is not born a woman; but becomes one” (267). Patriarchy makes use of sexual differences so as to maintain an inequality between man and woman. Indian patriarchal society renders a female submissive by ignoring her desires and needs. Both the society and family denies and disregards her freedom. As a subjugated figure, she is always supposed to live within the four walls of her family. Though there are numerous women emancipatory movements that tend to strengthened their position, politically they are still thwarted towards a corner. Though a working woman enjoys a better position, the better element is only marginal.

The contribution of women writers after the 1960s made a tremendous impact on women’s freedom and helped in subverting the existing gender discrimination to some extent. Feminist writers have shown great enthusiasm in portraying the strong, rebellious, powerful female in their novels. Through her strong and powerful female characters, Meera has established herself as a poignant painter of the emancipated female psyche. Her fiction has taken Indian women writing into a much loftier plane. She has thrown light into the unnoticed corners of the metropolitan city of Calcutta. The lively mapping of Calcutta profoundly explores a variety of female identities that were always been under the control of men. Her greatest symbolic work *Aarachar* gives an exhortation to the subordinated and subjugated female to come out of her shackles to become a self-assertive and self-reliant woman.

The protagonist Chetna Mullick is a twenty two year old woman. She represents the Grddha Mullick family who owns a great lineage in executing criminals. Most of the male members in the family showcase exceptional professional skill in hanging criminals to death. So naturally her family yearned for a male successor to carry on the professional lineage,
which is considered as a privilege. However unfavourable circumstances prompt her family to rely on Chetna, the elder one in the family as their successor.

*Hang woman* belongs to the category of buildungsroman as it explores the growth of Chetna from a little girl to a twenty two year old self sufficient female executioner; the first ever female executioner in the world. In her journey towards emancipation, she meets different men and women in person and also through the stories narrated by Thakuma, her old grandmother. In order to become a powerful female being she draws great inspiration from the mythical female characters like Manasa and Pingalakeshini as well as her ancestors to combat the patriarchal society. Chetna’s greatest inspirations are Pingalakeshini and Mansa who are the strong incarnations of female power as they have made their enemies to accept defeat and also made them kneel down finding no other way. Chetna sometimes frantically adopts the role of both these rebellious women figures and warns her veiled tyrannical lover against women’s rage. She expresses the statement ‘some women’s anger is such that it cannot be satiated with the death of just one man’ (172) to show the power of a woman. Though her life is marked by the presence of a number of masculine identities, it is her domineering father and manipulative lover who transform her life into a powerful one.

The narrative begins where the Indian Government appoints Chetna as its first hang woman but unfortunately she is denigrated to the position of an assistant to her father. As a woman she has to undergo a lot of ordeals and bitter experiences at different stages of her professional as well as personal life. She tastes the bitterness of male violence for the first time from Maruti Prasad. This incident occurs when she has started her career as a proofreader in Sri Maruti Press. It is at that point of time that she recognized her skill as a hang woman, a congenital skill in her blood. By creating the noose for Maruti who tries to molest her Chetna donnes the attire of a hang woman. That is the vengeance taken by a powerful woman. It is a noose she created not only for Maruti Prasad, but for the man who takes the female body for granted.

Love is an attribute in the making of a woman that makes her timid. Throughout the novel the conflict between love and hatred can be seen. She experiences the same conflict whenever she meets Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, an arrogant media person who wore the mask of a hypocrite lover. He pretends to be a lover and offers himself as a groom to her only to get sensational news for their global television. He is a manipulative as he feigns innocence. Chetna considers him as an exceptionally gifted pilferer who steals a precious family heirloom and he also has the talent to steal people’s heart with honey coated words. He is a
person who considers everything in terms of money and profit. For him, Chetna is a mere commodity for utilization and exploitation as well. Being a hypocrite, he makes an attempt to commodify the identity of Chetna including her speech, voice, movements, and experiences for a price. Though Chetna realizes the real nature of her manipulative lover, she succumbs to her passions and emotions. His presence annoys her and his caresses and gestures inflict pain on her body.

Unlike a feeble hearted woman, she never fails to perceive the real nature of him from his voyeuristic gaze and licentious expressions. Mitra also assumes the role of a tyrannical man as is evident from the first meeting with Chetna in which he openly reveals his attitude towards women. More than the diplomacy of a media person, one can witness the rapacious look in him. His first comment upon Chetna “I want to fuck you hard even if only once” (27), reveals his voyeuristic nature.

As a hang woman she gathers up all the vigour and energy of her ancestors in her body and mind desperately, but fails before Sanjeev Mitra. In order to justify her weakness she compares her heart to “a rain drenched lotus bud yearning to bloom” (69) which later transforms itself into her undesirable longing for him. At a very crucial moment she offers herself to Sanjeev despite her hatred towards him. Sanjeev tactfully neglects Chetna’s desire for fulfilment by bringing her to the brim of the passion. She reveals her intense longing for him as she says “My heart is desired him even when he hurt me more and more” (113). She overcomes her nervousness which makes her feeble by imbibing the role of a hang woman.

The proximity of Sanjeev especially after the denial of sexual experience prompts Chetna to prepare a noose and kept it for her, secretly, for hanging him. She also tries to make him feel inferior in some situations by bringing his theft to light and by exposing his stilted nature. She establishes her authority over the impostor by blaming him in several ways. There are certain instances in the novel which prove this. When Sanjeev Kumar tells her about their marriage though it won’t take place, she defeats him by uttering one statement that “marriage should only take place between equals” (142). On one occasion she very authoritatively addresses him “look here, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, there are many things in a hangman’s life that you cannot understand …” (138). This statement renders him more inferior to her.

Chetna, unlike any other women, is not so much feeble. Though she develops an interest in Sanjeev Kumar, she herself admits that her love is like the monsoon in Kolkata which doesn’t cool the air. Chetna also says “rather than giving me peace it (love) left me
terrified” (158). She considers herself a prey before a starved vulture: “my heartfelt as helpless as a bird trapped in the hollow of a burning tree, feather stiff and throat parched, able neither to fly nor burst into flames” (158). Her thoughts underline the shallowness of their relationship.

In the novel, Goddess Durga, an embodiment of power and strength makes her appearance several times. Chetna associates herself with Durga who exterminates her opponent with her rage and power. Identifying herself with the power of the goddess, she also yearns for the death and destruction of her greatest enemies. Biblical scriptures state the creation of woman from the rib of a man. Every one considers this matter for oppressing women. She blames the docility of Indian womanhood by saying that “who could submit meekly if a man gently rubbed the unguent of love on her and also her helplessness as a loner” (223).

Her transition from a weak woman to the embodiment of a powerful executioner frightens all the male opponents especially her lover and her father. Finally by assuming the role of Goddess Durga, she openly declares that she cannot submit to the will of her father or the lover or the husband or children to come in future. She expresses her rage towards tyrannical men by dishonouring them. She says “men are like tortoises, with hard-shells and soft bodies inside. When the shell breaks the helpless creature inside trembles in fear” (338). She uses strong and piercing words, that creates deep wounds in the hearts of her male enemies especially in Sanjeev Kumar Mitra.

Chetna who is always forced to live under men shatters all fretters around her by trying her best to establish her identity. She simply announces that she does not want the label of a ‘hangman’s daughter’, instead she wants to establish her own identity as a hang woman. Towards the end of the story, one is able to perceive how she attains satisfaction by becoming the first female executioner by executing the culprit without seeking the assistance of anyone, especially, her father. Thus her hand becomes a symbol of power and she herself becomes the symbol of a strong Indian womanhood. Upholding the power and courage she takes revenge upon her lover by demonstrating the performance of hanging where Sanjeev timidly assumes the role of a culprit before the media. Though he has some kind of fear within, before the public especially before the media he has to conceal it and has to carry out the role of a very gallant person. By bringing him into the role of an imaginary culprit, Chetna accomplishes her revengeful feat against the shrewd guileful lover by showering all
her rage on him and also by hanging him in her mind. She adopts total disregard and indifference to the man and as a revenge empowers herself to act against the powerful man.

Towards the end of the story she molds herself into a powerful hang woman by gathering courage for offending the manacles of female subjugation created by both her father and her scheming lover. She establishes her identity in the midst of surmounting problems by fighting against all these and by shattering false superstitious and conventional limitations. Chetna’s performance challenges the phallocentric order of the universe. Through the masculine sturdiness and her ancestor’s power Chetna overpowers masculine identities. The patriarchal universe which always underestimates feminine identity is sabotaged here. Chetna becomes a symbol which represents the entire womanhood who tries to beat male domination.
Works Cited:

