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Review of Literature: Women's Struggle for Domestic, Social, Political and Economic Space in K.R. Meera's Feminist Fictions

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ABSTRACT

K. R. Meera, known for phenomenal creations of beautifully bold women in her novels, has always been vociferous on equality and freedom for her female characters. Very strangely, like a hangwoman, she keeps her readers tied to a noose of reason and justice. Often, we are made to ask ourselves questions on our social responsiveness, the moral responsibility of dutiful citizens and how to break the chain of imbalance in the society. Aarachar tightens the noose around the neck of many men, still strongly footed in the outdated patriarchal society. Many Sanjeev Kumar Mitras are hung publicly. Texts like Hangwoman, Khabar, Khathakan, Meerayude Novellakal, explore characters like Chetna, Satyapriya, Bhavana and the like who try to establish themselves as equals of their male counterparts. Their struggle to emerge successful depicts the everyday struggle of many ordinary women around us. Co-existence is nature's impulse, emotional acceptance becomes the moral obligation of a sophisticated society. The purpose of this paper is to highlight how K. R. Meera, through the characterization of her signature women, show their struggle to gain social and economic space in a contemporary male-dominated society. Her commendable, outright writing to depict the identity of women is worth to be repeated as no male writers have ever taken the initiative to review a political, social incident and then speak for justice, write for the oppressed minority. Right to react is often questioned, as a minority, women need to react and respond intelligently. It's also interesting to notice the writer's new take on the concept of love. The age-old notions of pure love are let off to the air by the writer to showcase the righteousness of the decisions of her women. The paper also aims to discuss the redefinition of love the writer exhibits through a number of novels.

Keywords: *Phenomenal creations, Vociferous, Social responsiveness, Co-existence, Emotional acceptance.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the origin of novels, love in its various forms, as a theme, has attracted humanity. With the passage of time, the concept too underwent changes, in its gravity. Some characters remained with us; some were easily forgotten. Some among them, while compromising with the 'inevitable' made us cry within, often making us think they have had better choices. Conceiving the same idea, K. R. Meera has redefined the theme of 'love' through her ladies. *The Poison of Love*, *Yellow is the Colour of Longing*, *The Unseeing Idol of Light* and *The Angel's Beauty Spots* stand as a testing proof to defend the claim of newness in love, newness in the thoughts of the author. This paper takes into account these novels to defend the purpose outlined, Meera's perspective on the helpless and entrapped feelings of women, what love means to a woman, shows her constant endeavor to think herself without being chained or tuned. Choice of words and the way of narration adds further charm to her novels. Her way of storytelling is so vibrant and different. Packed with power, her women are symbols of fortitude and tenacity. They virtually turn the stone-hearted, delicate-minded.

The Poison of Love, the translation of the original work by Meera, *Meerasadhu*, is dipped in feminist spirit. The story moves around the courtship and marriage of Madhav and Tulsi. Meera explains the toxicity of relationships that exists among the patriarchal society. While portraying the devastated feelings of Tulsi, Meera mirrored the face of many Tulsis around her. Drawing inspiration from the sixteenth century poet, Mirabai, Meera created Tulsi. As in every other novel, Meera's narration moves back and forth to show the intensity of the plot, in this novel also. The plot is created in such a way to have many parallels from the story of Mirabai, who sacrificed every worldly pleasure for the sake of her Lord, Krishna. Tulsi's entangled relationship with Madhav and her way of making herself free doesn't mark an end to Tulsi's love and desire for Madhav. Tulsi's distressed mind and anger, her resentment switches on to frightening forms, Meera, thus encapsulates the very reality of abusive relationships. Meera unfolds the way women have been conditioned to adjust, understand and only receive everything else, except love. Tulsi and Madhav are replicas of men and women around us. Understanding Madhav to be a man who can't confine to a woman, Tulsi, unlike other women, frees herself, finally taking control over her life, making space for herself. After poisoning her two children and leaving Madhav, Tulsi chooses to live in Vrindavan, to finally witness Madhav's downfall as a middle-aged man.

Yellow is the Colour of Longing, a collection of fifteen stories written by K. R. Meera in Malayalam, centers around the story of two strangers who meet at the hospital's outpatient

division. Drawn to each other by desire they soon are bound into a relationship. Meera attempt to diagnose the ills of a society where desire is a disease, the pseudo morality of the society is also questioned. Meera address an age-old issue of women dealing with the limitations that restricts their autonomy. To create an extra ordinary effect, K. R. Meera uses everyday settings surrounding everyday people. From the perspective of conventional morality, the relationship between a man and a married woman, is illicit and immoral. But from the perspective of reflective morality, love is presented to be perennial. It just happens anywhere, in any circumstances. The absurdity of desire from man who appeared grey in colour, who was doubtful about the intensity/trueness of his desires/feelings, finally turns him to a man who cannot take his stances, ending his own very life towards the end of the novel. The woman, was able to reflect and break herself from the societal norms, setting herself free from her 'disease', to a space she created for herself. Hence, the same yellow - jaundice that once caused physical illness in the woman and caused the death of the man, is attributed to the desire and longing they possessed. When the desire in the man killed him, the longing in the woman gave her new hopes to live forward. Both the conventional morality and reflective morality co- exists in a patriarchal society made man and woman. By default, the conventional morality asks for acceptance of the societal norms just to preserve the social order, reflective morality solely depends on the individual's perception of his/her moral right and wrong. The characters in the story could hardly suppress their feelings for each other. Unlike the age-old portrayals of romanticized or idealised love, the carnal desire, the lust, the unending longing for flesh exhibited by the characters are depicted along with all its absurdity.

The Unseeing Idol of Light, tosses the question, how can human beings, with all their desires, love, longings, seek justice in a blind and impaired world? Deepti, who is in an advanced state of pregnancy, goes missing during an overnight train journey. She felt suffocated to remain in the congested air that surrounded her. The rest of the novel describes her husband's search over the next ten years in search of Deepti. Prakash loses his eyesight following the trauma and starts a relationship with Rajani, an orphaned girl. Due to his obsession for Deepti, he is unable to love Rajani. Perhaps the novel's greatest achievement is its vision of blindness as a general condition of all humans, not restricted to or even particular to the sightless. The transformative potential of love to bring light to the unseeing, to paint new eyes on the face of the beloved, is the central idea of this fable, delivered convincingly through the power of Meera's artful vocabulary.

K. R. Meera's *The Angel's Beauty Spots* has three novellas in it that are centred around the life of three tenacious women. Angela of *The Angel's Beauty Spots*, Radhika of *And Forgetting the*

Tree, I... Geeta of *The Deepest Blue* are portrayed as a symbol of tenacity. The three of them were exposed to trauma, but they hesitated to surrender to any emotions other than self-generated. They were born strong, yet victims of trauma. While the text expresses the voice of the traumatized, it also sounds the voice of sternness of the brave-hearted. As Geoffrey Hartman points out, the language of literature, be it figurative or not, offers the opportunity to tackle grasping the elusive traumatic event and thus move beyond the irrepresentable suffocated voice. The unheard, suffocated voice is heard through the medium of powerful writing and vocabulary. The voice of the protagonists of *The Angel's Beauty Spots* has moved beyond, through the language of the author. Thus, K. R. Meera's new take on feminism and redefinition of love enthral the readers, giving a different reading experience altogether.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

The study helps to:

- Redefine the role of women in the post-modern era.
- Help identify the domestic, social, cultural, economic halo that surrounds women of aristocratic families.
- Find out whether shadows are necessary for a woman to function however difficult her present is.
- Find out if it's easy for a woman to establish herself around the prejudiced, patriarchal class.
- Examine the circumstances that takes a woman form independent/stern opinions on issues of importance.
- Analyse how courage coincides within the actions of Meera's female protagonists.
- Understand how women of tomorrow will think and act.
- Show the intensity and importance of the feelings of women in general.

III. RELATED WORKS

The available research papers on K. R Meera's different works are analysed and interpreted to find out areas where research gap persists. Available research journals, articles from various websites are referred in order to differentiate the topics under study.

(A) Representation of State Violence in K R Meera's *The Gospel of Yudas*, a paper written by Lalitha Joseph, St. Johns College, Anchal, describes the political implications of the state's representations of state and non-state violence through the Naxalites and police over the years. The approach of the state towards the suppression of Naxalites and the agitating civilians has

gained popular attention. The actual statistics of casualties always differed from the published data. The method of torture the state machinery adopted in order to properly 'treat' the captured to extract information have always remained unknown. The fiction's framework is designed in such a way to voice the violence of the state fearlessly. Thus, the paper offers a study on how the state handles the resentment and adopt corrective, creative measures. The novel narrates the story of a guilty Naxalite who was tortured to death to give information about his friends. Naxalbari Movement is at length discussed by the writer, having said to exercise influence on dispossessed and underprivileged rural masses. In Kerala, the movement was more of an intellectual movement. It was based on Maoist ideology. In *The Gospel of Yudas*, K. R. Meera identifies a group of characters as agents of state violence. The violence of the state was always supported by the state agents, the police, the military and the judiciary. Violence by the people was considered illegitimate. State violence gives way to resistance by people. Revolution doesn't stop at all. Thus, the paper reiterates the relevance of *The Gospel of Yudas* in raising important questions pertaining to social issues.

(B) Evoking the Female Prowess: A Journey towards Self-Realisation in K. R. Meera's *Aarachar*, a paper by Vidhya Vijayan explores the life of Chetna Gradha Mullick, the first successful female executioner from the novel, *Aarachar*. The novel is referred to as a female epic, claiming Beauvoir's statement 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one' to be credibly relevant. Fighting with patriarchy, women have established themselves, reserving a place for them. She no longer allows the society to nullify her existence and importance. Chetna had raged feelings when she was suppressed. Surpassing the norms of the conventional society's ritualistic practices, Chetna breaks the chains of potential oppression of female by male chauvinists. By combating different struggles, her journey towards self-realisation as portrayed in the novel is discussed at length in the paper. The novel, *Hangwoman* is said to be under the category bildungsroman as it traces the growth of Chetna from a little girl to a self-sufficient, determined woman. Her transition to a powerful woman stuns every male opponent, including her father, her lover. She establishes her identity fighting against all odds. Chetna challenges the phallogocentric order of the universe. Chetna becomes a representative of entire womanhood, not letting the patriarchal universe underestimate female identity.

(C) Translation, Culture and the Loss of Meaning in K. R. Meera's *Aarachar* by Ajeesh A.K. and R. Pranesh Kumar evaluates the original novel, *Aarachar* and its English translation by J. Devika by employing Nida and Newmark's and Vermeer's understanding of cultural translation to enable a comparative reading. The paper largely discusses the ability of translations to transcend across generations without linguistic barriers. A translation can be

used to promote traditions, practices and ideologies. Taking into consideration the limitations of a translation, its incapability to transfer the meaning completely, the paper considers the source culture and target culture to be significantly different. The paper analyses the loss of meaning through the comparative reading of both the texts. The researcher through this paper intends to trace the difficulties of the translator while translating, also, the extent to which the translator has succeeded in achieving an equivalence of meaning bound in a cultural setting. The paper takes into account the very possibility of loss of meaning during translation to an extent, as the text is strongly bound to cultural aspects. The lack of similarities between the source and target culture, it becomes inevitable for a translator to include certain omissions and additions in order to preserve certain references to itself. The researcher says complete dynamic equivalence is not desirable, hence ruling out the strong presence of cultural implications.

(D) Evolved Femininity: An analysis on K. R. Meera's Novel *Aarachar*, another paper which discusses the novel from a feministic perspective examines the theoretical dimensions to analyse the very concept of gender and sex. To the researcher the novel questions the basic difference of the gender by the codes of conventions set by the society. By analysing the features of society perceived male and female, K. R. Meera has moved to break the rigid system. The paper analyses the novel in two different halves for a better analysis, the gendered self and metamorphosed self, based on gender theory. To the researcher, the very challenge starts with the title of the novel, as there's no feminine counter word available for the Malayalam word, *Aarachar*. The translation thus, is titled *Hangwoman*. The paper discusses the new area of womanhood by the analysis of gender schematization in the novel. It also discusses the elevated journey of a woman from constructed/ created femininity to evolve as self. Taking this novel as a base, an attempt is made to redefine gender. The paper has taken into account quantities of qualities attributed to both the genders to illustrate the impractical base of gender. The researcher attempts to prove the body less form of gender identity, which can be created based on individual choice. The characters in the novel fail to keep the order the society expects them to follow. At length, gender sets framework for women, which expects them not to travel beyond.

(E) Hari M. G. in his paper, Negotiation of identity in K. R. Meera's *Aarachar*, explores the negotiation of identity in the novel in the light of Michael Foucault's deliberations on power, subjectivity and critique. The novel's layered construction on how power shapes subjectivity and its detailing of scope for resistance, echoes the thoughts of Foucault. The resistance shown by the protagonist is characterised by resourcefulness to involve in the mechanics of power, to remake her identity. Power is a force that creates identities. The paper

also considers the reality of the post-modern visual media's hypocrisy. It also closely examines the underpinnings of the individual resistance of the protagonist in the light of Michael Foucault's expositions which happens in a private space. The baffled Chetna's transition to a powerful individual itself shows the subjugation she had to face at the initial stage. The choices she adopts creates space for herself, where she could imagine her subjectivity. Her subjectivity becomes an act of bringing forth new dimensions of existence as per Foucault's positive definition of freedom. K. R. Meera contextualises such a heroic tale within the harsh realities of modern India. To the researcher, that makes *Hangwoman* one of the most remarkable novels in contemporary Indian Writing in English.

(F) Denial of Female Subjectivity in K. R. Meera's *Meerayude Novallakal* portrays that the women were considered as the mere objects for men's pleasure and for their comfortable existence. They were denied ownership rights and they were bossed over by men in the patriarchal society. Their feelings were always neglected. The women in these stories lacked the capacity to take decisions freely and their men denied them subjectivity. The researcher proposes that women should be allowed to live freely and find their subjectivity. Feminist literary theory is employed to analyse the status of women and men in society to know better the lives of women. The paper considers the theory to voice women by pointing out the contribution of women over the past years. It's power and domination which are central to the construction of male sexuality. Man dominates over woman; he even covers his guilty feelings through his words and actions. The hardships faced by women are naturally depicted in the novel. From their childhood women are made to feel inferior as they are grown up in a patriarchal society. They become objects of harassment without letting their live to her own choices.

(G) Reading K. R. Meera's *Hangwoman* as a Critique of Bio-Political Control, a paper by Nishitha Pandey discusses the novel as a critique of the state's bio-political control. Western discourses around bio-politics are of little importance in the post-colonial scenario. It discusses the peculiarity of its larger socio-political context. Detailed account of the violence that created ruckus in the state, as an instrument of oppression by men to retain control over situations. The essay also looks at the ways in which the protagonist of the novel constructs her own genealogy of female ancestors. Also, the skilful manner in which story-telling and the metaphor of the noose are used by the protagonist as acts of identity formation and resistance. Meera's novel is presented as a re-imagination of discourses in public sphere. Even a single power exercised by a woman who is not rich, not privileged but class or caste can significantly change the society's approach. Chetna's final act completely raptures masculinist imaginations of power. It

introduces a different ethics of the representation of gender, nationhood and bio-political ambitions of the state mechanism. The capitalist media enterprises creating mass contagions is widely criticised.

(H) Noose around the Noose Maker- A Study of Media-Cannibalism in K. R. Meera's *Hangwoman* explores *Hangwoman* in the light of Exploitative sensationalism of the Indian media of current times which every single personal news to a sensational story of news value. When the turn of events serves to make Chetna, the protagonist, into India's first officially turned hangwoman, she's thrust into the attention of public eye all on a sudden, gets undesired public attention. Crept into a world of politics, bureaucracy and sensation driven media and the sensational story makers, the mechanics of subjugation surrounds her. When she becomes a pawn at the ambitious hands of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, she becomes a victim at those hands, too much personally. She experienced the most humiliated by the man who pretended to love her, she at a times loves and hates him. This is presented as a reflection of the hyper reality and victimisation of post- modern visual media. In an era where news making has become a creation for entertainment, the ways and means the news makers create sensational stories to raise the viewer's rate, has posed several questions on humanity. Again, the paper discusses the way power shapes subjectivity and the scope for resistance. The researcher makes a study of Chetna's gritty resistance to media cannibalism which is trending within the country. In short, it questions power structures and the protagonist's response to those in-built forces of power, trying to assert a woman's identity. The paper questions the ethics, humanity and the responsibility of matured journalism.

(I) A Feministic Approach to *Hangwoman* by K. R. Meera analyse the text from feministic perspective. To the researcher, the novelist portrays male domination and the story moves ahead through the stream of consciousness of the protagonist. The mental trauma of a twenty-two-year-old girl who was forced to be the first ever hangwoman of the country, following her family profession. Chetna is represented as a symbol of absolute power in a male dominated society. It took time for her to grow up to become a woman. Again, the hypocrisy of post-modern visual media is again highlighted in this paper also. The novel is presented as an extraordinary that is enriched with the themes of death, love and depression. Every line in the novel smell death. The paper considers the novel as an attack on the unprofessional, inhuman behaviour of the media. All the characters in the novel are viewed from the point of Chetna. Her character is compared to that of Lady Macbeth, one of the most powerful Shakespearean characters. The manliness in her character is identified to show her strength. Chetna's self-identity has been questioned by the other characters in the novel. She was marginalised by her

own father. The plight of women in contemporary woman in India is being portrayed by the novelist, says the researcher. Thus, *Hangwoman* raises the voices for women.

(J) The Question of Existential Predicament: Theme of Death in the Novel *The Gospel of Yudas*, recognises Existentialism as a contemporary doctrine theorised by Jean Paul Sartre which can be applied to the text of K. R. Meera, *The Gospel of Yudas* as a result of its extensive critical engagements. The term Existentialism includes several psychological notions about the complex nature of human beings. While analysing the characters from that perspective, their sensitivity to the social environment, their engagements with their issues related to their very existence, the impact of these on their mind and actions are taken into account by the researcher. They are seen constantly fighting struggling for their existence. The paper analyses *The Gospel of Yudas* having shown existential predicaments in its plot and the characters. The fear of death and being traumatised by its fear enhances the emotions of readers. Both birth and death are integral speres of human emotions. The novelist doesn't treat death emotionally, to her, death is something that would prove their existence. A close association with death would eventually turn into an existential predicament, directing to a deep sense of purpose and meaning of life.

IV. IDEAL SOLUTION, CURRENT STATUS AND IMPROVEMENTS REQUIRED

The various issues raised by researchers seem to be relevant for all times, the issues are genuine and the interpretations given are innovative. The possible solutions to the problems rests with the state machinery in its implication, but the better solution to every problem would be attitudinal change. If the society embrace the individual emotions without gender indifference, much of the desirable change would be possible. Domination doesn't seem to be the quality of a civilised society. Prejudice and patriarchy can't ever rule the land. If people learn to accept each other's emotions and their existence, perhaps better ambience devoid of violence and crimes can be thought of.

V. RESEARCH GAP

Most of the research conducted so far limits the study to her masterpiece, *Hangwoman*. Identity search, evolved femininity, female subjectivity, existentialism are some of the common topics on which papers are written. A few other research papers look at her work from feministic perspective. Full-fledged research on her stalwart, unwavering female champions is yet to be done. Hence, if done, this research will be the first ever to concentrate on the struggle of female protagonists of K R Meera.

VI. LIMITATIONS

The analysis is more practical as the situations discussed in the texts under analysis are genuine. The Indian traditional background does support the existence of male domination. The suppression of women at work and home, the threats girl children face shows the immense increase in crime. The system fails to implement justice. Often justice remains as a memory. Solutions without punishments do not convince the general public. Like a fly trapped in web, the victim flaps for existence. Caught in, they often do not get liberated, rather it falls a prey to other creatures. The dichotomised division of the society does save the culprits, the judiciary becomes another place of bureaucracy. Law and justice must support the truth than allowing only the rich exist. Co-existence is the rule of nature. The author includes only male and female under gender, while transgenders do not form part of the discussion. Also, the limited availability of research papers on the author's texts limits the scope of this study.

VII. CONCLUSION

Thus, from a different angle K. R. Meera's works are examined. Meera's novels are the hometown of epic women, they are the battlefield to establish ideological supremacy. All of her characters dwell upon their past or presence, finally emerging themselves, establishing themselves firmly by creating space for them from the already existing vacuum. May that be *Chetna Grddha Mullick*, the hangwoman, *Deepti*, the wife who leaves her husband in *The Unseeing Idol of Light*, *Prema*, the Naxalite of *The Gospel of Yudas*, *Angela*, the victim of failed love, *Radhika*, the wife who tries to come in terms with her former love of *The Deepest Blue* are characters churned to be specimens of inner strength. The novelist's way of handling the themes of death, the narration of plentiful historical background in her novels perhaps haunts the reader, it makes them smell death, the lingering feel of death becomes a painful experience for the readers' mind. But, yes, they do admire the sternness in them to place themselves comfortably without yielding to their men.

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