

Mythic Reverie and Memory Trails: Unveiling the Layers in K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman*

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Abstract

In *Hangwoman*, K.R Meera integrates the narrative of Chetna Grddha Mullick, the first female executioner in Indian history is revealed through the blending of myth and memory. The novelist explores the intricacies of identity, power, and the human mind against the backdrop of a culture rooted in patriarchal customs. Chetna struggles with her own sense of self and purpose as she makes her way through her turbulent journey, plagued by her past and obligations. Meera expertly creates a novel that transcends time and place through vivid female characters that are unrelated to each other. This allows the readers to reflect on the complexities of human experience and the lasting effects of history. "*Hangwoman*" interweaves strands of the past and present to shed light on myth and memory in a captivating way. The Indian communities have focused on preserving their traditions and customs and the same is reflected in the work of Meera. The paper sheds light on how the beliefs, traditions and myths of executioners is preserved and as each generation passes by, they ensure to share this gathered information to the next as a gesture to extend the hand of the elders in the growth of the present and future generations.

Keywords: Myth, Memory, Death, Chetna, Thakuma, Belief

In *Hangwoman*, Meera reflects how Devi Sati and Lord Shiva is well recognized in India, a country home for too many different faiths and beliefs. Even atheists are familiar with the Hindu myths. Although *Hangwoman* is a mythical story, the novelist uses this familiarity to weave a myth about the grim beginning of the fictional land of the protagonist, even founding the land from a human being's death. The myth, history and memories of the older members of the family seep into the young ones and they are immersed into the life that is fueled by these myths. Chetna, the protagonist's life and the family's history are interconnected to death in one way or another. Meera rightly observes that "The words of whoever speaks of death, however slight she may be, carry inflated value" (*Hangwoman*, 2014, 86). The protagonist is surrounded by the elements of death at every grim turn of event in her life is correlated with death or she seeks death, of her own or others, shows how she is more in relation with death.

It is the fact that a person's nurturing influences their subconscious thinking more than one may expect. When the protagonist is accepted as the successor for her father's profession she felt as if a noose had been hung around her neck, this is one of the many examples elaborately written by the author which

substantiates the fact that the protagonist's life is surrounded by death and it is an indication towards the fact that the protagonist is surrounded by her family's and land's myth and memories.

Throughout the novel, Meera paints a picture about how the stories told by Chetna's grandmother, Thakuma, the remnant of the old times mold the protagonist's views whereas Chetna normally shy and calm whose speech indicates hesitation and weak mindedness is seen to have an unnatural sense of confidence when speaking about her newly given profession. All question aimed at her by the media is tactfully responded by the protagonist using her memory of all the myth which is passed to her by Thakuma.

A few like to tell stories, many like to listen to these stories as time changes these said stories go through a lot of changes similar to the changes faced by the land, for they are passed down from one generation to another. The myth that the people listen to or narrate might be that of a person who have done good deeds and as time changed they passed down story might have a commingling of the storyteller's own imagination termed as mythology. In ancient India, there were many similar monarchies in which existed the profession of bard, they used to travel through kingdoms spreading the valiant acts of people and at times these bards may include their own twist to the stories thus picturizing the heroes as beings away from this world.

The present world exist on theories which are backed by evidences and proof contradicting to this is how the past was, in the past peoples belief in gods or those things unexplainable were left to the notion that it were the acts of god. The birth of myth is most likely through words of belief and action. In recently released Tamil movie *Captain Miller*, the curtain raiser to it is with the monologue of an old lady taking about how the action of a normal person enabled them to achieve the unthinkable, this has been passed down through their generations and at some point, the people envisioned that person as their savior god and the mere story turned into a myth. This is how most myths are given birth and similar this is how the novel's protagonist's life is weaved.

At first glance one comes to the deduction that a society have devoid itself of the old ways of life and abandoned the mythical beliefs they followed; when looked upon closely the mythical beliefs still exist strongly and it shapes most of the decisions of people, though it may not be common to all some still follow their beliefs, knowingly or unknowingly. For instance, the belief that one should not touch the sweep after the suns down is still followed by many of the households in India, likewise the belief that a black cat crossing you is considered as bad luck. All these and a lot more of such myths are still followed by many for it is what they believe in knowingly and unknowingly and also it is a part of their habits or daily life.

In the novel, Meera has incorporated another important element that the very existence of myth is memory. By taking into consideration the characters in the novel is able to see that myth and memory play hand in hand to ensure that the myth survives through time. Thakuma is the primary example on how memory is involved in preserving myth. It is through the grandmother's storytelling that Chetna, the protagonist learns about the long history of her family and their profession. Though the protagonist has a higher education, she is provided every opportunity to come outside of her community and family

profession that her subconscious mind is wired to the myths spoken to her. “The hangman’s blood that flowed in my veins yearned for the vitality of his soul” (*Hangwoman*, 2012, pg.no 41), rather than a teenage girl’s romantic emotion Chetna felt an emotional pull towards the reporter Mitra who was doing a story about their family. Meera has made it sure to portray that the protagonist is strongly influenced by the family profession and also the history of her family. The juxtaposition of how love is a symbol of new life and vitality is drawn to Chetna which validated this emotion by stating that the hangman’s blood. In other words, someone closely associated with death, yearned for the soul of the reporter is an indication to the point that love and death may have a much closer connection than one may perceive and if not mistaken some myths believe that love and death are similar in many ways when looked upon from closer perspective.

Another important character involved in the development of the protagonist’s life and point of view is her father who himself is a hangman, due to old age he is in a sense of hurriedness to hand over the job to the next generation and since his only male heir is physically handicapped the next best option for Phanibhushan is to lean on his daughter. Due to the constant bickering of her father and her love for the reporter, above all for the survival of her family, the protagonist is forced to follow her ancestors’ path. Although this is an opportunity that the protagonist is succumbed to accept her demeanor changes altogether when in an interview as part of being appointed as the first female hang person. The reason for the protagonist’s sudden change may be viewed as the influence of the background in which she grew up and a major portion of her life included the grasping of the family and community myths and lore. “My eyes burned. A gigantic tree, too heavy for me to carry, grew on top of my head. Its roots penetrated my throat and heart. In between the roots, a bird beat its wings, desperate, fearing for its life” (*Hangwoman*, 2012 pg.no 85), in the words of the author, this is how the protagonist felt when she first sat down for the interview, as the scene proceeds, the readers are able to see how the protagonist is able to answer the scrutinizing questions in a tactful manner, though she received no prior training, this maybe due to her knowledge gained through formal education as well as her knowledge on the family history/myth to which she was exposed from an early age, pointing out to the fact on how myth and memory work hand in hand.

As long as humans exist, the survival of myth is ensured. Myth and memory are the two sides of the same coin, one cannot exist without the other. From the novelist’s feminist perspective, underling themes have been chosen here for the purpose of enlightening the readers to view the work from a different point of view. The largest player in the society’s tradition and culture is its myths, which are stored in the memories of people, for they have been passed down from generation to generation. Based on the novel *Hangwoman* the themes of myth and memory focus on the protagonist family who have been professional hangmen for a long time and the novel elaborates on how the protagonist’s life is influenced by the myth surrounding her family’s profession and the stories passed on to her from the memory of her grandmother and father. Through this work of K.R Meera, she extensively speaks about death and how it is a part of life. The similarities between love, life and death are spoken throughout the novel in a subtle manner and this paper aims to bring forth such underling themes to the limelight.

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