

## TOWARDS A FEMINIST 'POETIC JUSTICE': CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN K. R. MEERA'S *HANGWOMAN* AND *THE GOSPEL OF YUDAS*

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### **Abstract:**

*This study is an attempt to explore and comparatively analyse the selected, translated novels of K.R. Meera namely *Hangwoman* (2014) and *The Gospel of Yudas* (2016), which were originally written in Malayalam the native language of the writer from a feminist-philosophical perspective. The unravelling of feminist concerns in literary writings subsequently unfolds the inherent injustices created by the existing hegemonic power relations. The study intrigues into the concept of 'Justice' conceived in the novels, which is being analysed through the layers of feminist existentialism to derive a subaltern, feminist interpretation of Justice from the same.*

**Key Words:** *Justice, Feminist Existentialism, Power, Transformative Justice.*

Existential philosophy, in general, makes an attempt to find existential meaning of modern human who strives to be the master of universe with the tools of philosophy and science which have ended up in complete nihilism. It is difficult to assign existentialism to any doctrine with a universal definition as the existential philosophy of Sartre, Heidegger and Marcel varies so deeply. Maurice Friedman cautions that any attempt to define existentialism itself in a single, structured manner will loosen its very essence: "The very notion that existentialism is something that can be defined in a catch phrase, or that one can merely know about it without understanding it from within, has made it, for some people, into an intellectual fad and robbed it of its proper seriousness"<sup>1</sup>. However, it can be inferred that, for the existentialist, to exist means to become conscious of the essence 'within' and becoming more aware of the consequences of existence.

Feminist Existentialism unveils 'what it is to experience life as a woman', 'what it ought to make one a woman' and 'what are the consequences to be a woman' in a man's world. In Feminist Existentialism, authenticity is central, since patriarchy diminishes its possibilities to the female sex, as every hegemonic power structure deconstructs and precincts authenticity of the powerless. Here, being female in a patriarchal world limits the 'can do' body, agency and authenticity. From this premise, Beauvoir has articulated how women are Othered<sup>2</sup> even from themselves, and how binaries are being created and imposed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates subaltern as the person removed from all lines of social mobility<sup>3</sup>, which precisely fits into the norms associated with a female body, and thus to the 'Other'.

This can be interpreted in a multitude of dimensions in alignment with the Foucauldian concept of docile body and power/knowledge dynamics in deconstruction theory. By identifying body not only as a text of culture, but also as the practical, direct locus of social control<sup>4</sup>, Foucault explained femininity and masculinity as historically conditioned. Therefore, the lived experience of female body is central in appropriating nuances of self-female and male-female equations, from where freedom and interpersonal relationships stem from. This, in turn, questions and redefines each other through the expressions of anguish or/and rebellion. Therefore, the study specifically focuses on these three major facets of feminist existentialism such as the experience of living as a human female body, interpersonal relationships and

freedom for an in-depth analysis.

As Heidegger exclaims, language is the house of Being<sup>5</sup>. Existential elements in literature are rich with vivid expressions and imaginations. Many novelists in the 19th century wrote about anguish and/or rebellion in human life. These literatures on philosophy of existentialism prove that literary existentialism is based on philosophical conventions. Steven Earnshaw argues that there is literariness in existentialism and most of the literary works in existential literature surpass existentialism as an exclusive philosophy and allow its influence to cast over the whole literature<sup>6</sup>. Those works serve to be the embedded textual bodies of the theoretical essence of existentialism.

When it comes to women's writing or feminist literature, the intricate way of expressing female anxiety associated with isolation and her rebellion to break free from essentialist capabilities strengthens the existentialist probability of female characters. Oppression and oppressive experiences give way to creative transformation in women's lived life and this aspect has been emphasised by all feminist writers though their writings on existentialist feminism. However, woman's oppression and her emancipatory desire to free herself from the historic bondages in literature not only reflect women's lived experiences, but also depict the inescapable identity conflicts associated with the transformation. This creative transformation happens not in isolation but in the geographical space of domination as Toril Moi mentions that there is no pure feminist or female space and all ideas including feminist ones are 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology<sup>7</sup>.

The confinements of justice also can be understood in that same way. Plato's definition of justice as the virtue or wisdom of mind<sup>8</sup> to John Rawls' concept of justice as fairness<sup>9</sup>, overlooked not only premises of commencements and consequences of justice inside the prevailing inequalities, but also its naturalisation and inevitability consolidated by the society. It is conditioned that society determines the consequences of individual actions. The element of justice is so ingrained in existentialism that existentialism argues for crossing the societal consequences and debates to follow individual justice rather than for societal justice. The study begins from the premise of problematising the conflicts between different levels of justice and their inefficiency in serving justice to the offence, offender and the offended. In this backdrop, the significance of developing a new concept of justice (as a continuation of Feminist Justice Ethics) with the theoretical framework of feminist existentialism can employ further prospects of exploring and interpreting justice in a transformative sense.

This study primarily arises from these three questions. Isn't it necessary to incorporate a subaltern, feminist perspective to justice, since justice is defined not only from androcentric structures, but also from the First-world, white, anthropocentric, power hegemonies? Aren't the existing theories of justice inadequate to explain state-sponsored crimes and its possible 'impossible outcomes' to the underprivileged, since they are developed from the premises where the inherent injustices exerted to certain groups are neither recognised nor problematised? In a world, where crimes/violations done exclusively to women (specifically to the underprivileged, subaltern, native women) not only to put her body in question, but also to exert power are exponentially increasing day by day, isn't it extremely important to explore its reflections and interpretations on literature, especially in feminist literature?

The study proposes a research framework of feminist existentialism focusing on the three major aspects namely the experience of living as a human female body, interpersonal relationships and freedom. These three elements are analysed with respect to the indispensable responses of anguish/rebellion towards it and its correlation to justice. In short, the study is an attempt to conceive justice, specifically transformative justice, from the marginalised female experiences of body, interactive relationships and freedom as expressed in the novels through their female protagonists. The study proposes to follow Bibliographical and Textual Approach from a feminist-philosophical perspective.

The literary history of Malayalam novels explicitly exhibits its inspiration from western thoughts and philosophies. Thinkers like Freud and Sartre were highly influential in some of the master piece works

in the Malayalam literature by authors like O.V Vijayan, M. Mukundan and Anand. Meera's novels are latest in this series, exhibiting feminist existentialism as a key trait of her female characters. While this can be a subconscious act, it is invariably evident that she, as a part of her critical political observations, consciously disturbs the existing male-female equations where women are variables against the male-set constants, by constantly questioning and challenging through her writings.

K. R. Meera writes and voices from a Third-world subaltern women perspective. Her language, stylistics and philosophies relentlessly revolt with hierarchies and hegemonies. Justice is an intimate, inevitable and intertwining concept in her writings. Beyond its spiritual, philosophical and material dimensions, the writer encompasses the whole concept of 'justice' as something ultimately 'poetic', 'universal' and 'absolute'. She differentiates 'female justice' from mainstream justice, since justice implemented by human beings will be subjected to their own experiences and perceptions, and thus vary. While the former implements equitable application of justice which is transformative, the latter focuses on its equal distribution which is retributive in nature. Her literature symbolically aims to unfold the blindfold ('lady') justice and see the crime and 'criminal' from 'her' perspective.

After receiving Kendra Sahitya Academy Award for *Aarachar* in 2016, Meera stressed in her acceptance speech that being a Man is an attitude and being a Woman is, in fact, a condition. Man comprises of all human beings (devoid of gender) representing an attitude of power and aggressive dominance, and subsequently, whoever is not a man becomes a woman<sup>10</sup>. Here, she propounds a revived definition of male-female dichotomy and it is evident that her writing challenges this very basic bifurcation. Similarly, it can be argued that female justice is not just an ideology put forward by women by the virtue of their sex, but as a category of the Other humans. Here, the writer's concept of female justice also proves to be inevitably subaltern from its inception. K. R. Meera's female characters seek justice from identity conflicts, love, ego, revenge, power, invasion and institutionalisation, which can be appropriated into the tripartite classification of female body, interpersonal relationships and freedom.

In *Hangwoman*, she posits female justice as 'poetic justice' where as mainstream/male justice as a whitened side of the coin of structured ego and hierarchy. Her female protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, implements justice by hanging the culprit's egoistic 'I' and power politics. She says: "I can forgive greed. But not that 'I' bent on conquest"<sup>11</sup>. *Hangwoman* also retells the story and the lost history of women in a hangmen family in India. Chetna, being a hangwoman, is supposed to implement justice served by the state justice derived from an androcentric culture. She "has been adept at fashioning the noose used for hanging from before her birth. Her grandmother recounts how, as a foetus in her mother's womb, she tied a perfect noose from the umbilical cord around her own neck"<sup>12</sup>. However, towards the end of the novel, she implements a transformative and poetic justice by hanging Sanjeev Kumar Mitra till he sees the beginning of an end (death) and comes back to life. By doing so, she as well tightens the rope into the necks of patriarchy, power politics, state, culture, capitalism, colonialism and media insensitivity.

On the other hand, *The Gospel of Yudas* reiterates the state-sponsored trenchant violations upon its people. It might be described as the strange love story of Prema towards (Yu)Das at the first glance, but its essence is a traitor's search for justice. While Das's love overpowered his ideology, Sunanda's justice was beyond the justice of her comrade and companion. By committing to her truth, and subsequently death, she serves justice to all the victims of institutionalised injustices. Thus, her martyrdom becomes the strongest resistance to hegemonic power. In Das' own words: "The waves couldn't conquer her. Instead she conquered the waves. Oh! What strength she possessed. It isn't the might of the body, but the power of the mind."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Sunanda resists injustice and authority by exerting her agency, even winning over her death.

Like Camus' interpretation of the life of Sisyphus as a fulfilling one that makes good of his seemingly hopeless situation to achieve true Existential fulfilment<sup>14</sup>, *The Gospel of Yudas* reinterprets that Das's tormented life and endless struggle for compensation of his act of betrayal fulfils his existential ego. Both the novels strongly emphasise that history will be repeated and justice will be served. They also

underpin the fact that human justice is a justice served to a particular event or circumstances, but universal justice is something which offers universal closure to an act.

Justice is a prerequisite for love and life, or else the women of Meera's literary works conceive and explore love and life through the concept of justice. While Chetna and Sunanda outgrow their love by serving justice to themselves and the society, it reinforces the concept of 'personal is political'<sup>15</sup>. Chetna responds to the interviewer: "Our [women's] lives are bound to each other like the links in a chain. One completes what someone else has begun in some other time." (*Hangwoman* 426). Similarly, justice is also a concept interlinked through time, place, people and context.

Capital punishment and Naxalism, which involve bodily violence, function as retributive to the violence perpetrated by the culprits. Chetna's grandmother Thakuma staunchly believes that it is their family's responsibility to serve justice by hanging the culprit. For Sunanda, her life's mission is aiding 'an eye for an eye' retributive justice. In both the situations, Foucauldian idea of 'docile body' becomes problematic. As Nancy Fraser argues, if individuals are simply the effects of power, mere 'docile bodies' shaped by power, then it becomes difficult to explain who resists power<sup>16</sup>. It can be viewed that this resistance has an intrinsic value in one's existence. The same docile body that internalises injustices can react to it by questioning the power structure.

If we look into the life situations of other female characters in the novel *Hangwoman* carefully, Chetna's mother is a victim of marital bondage and neglect, living under the patriarchal blanket of wifedom with frustration, where as her husband is a regular customer at a brothel. Her co-sister ends up selling her body for meeting the medical expenses of her ill husband, which in turn ends up in her brutal murder committed by Chetna's father. While Sanjeev Kumar Mitra's mother has inherited prostitution as a part of her community tradition and is very proud of it, Sanjeev, being the son of an unapologetic prostitute, finds pleasure in exerting his male power and control over Chetna to constantly make her apologetic about her confidence and identity.

As Susan Moller Okin claims, the theories of justice which either assume family as a just institution or ignore its space completely, both lose coherence and relevance.<sup>17</sup> Family is a vital force in defining one's existence. Chetna's family makes it a point to remind her of her limitations as a woman, even though they are proud that she is keeping the legacy of the Mullick hangman profession. They become easily convinced of Sanjeev's proposal to marry her. The love-hatred relationship between Chetna and Sanjeev is often surprising in its creation and narration. The same ambiguity is evident in the relationship between Das and Prema, where Prema is constantly following Das and he is constantly eloping from her love. For Prema, following her love has become a definition for her existence; an alternate identity. To her, it was also a journey of penance being born to a gruesome oppressor of Naxalites who had tortured and murdered many young men and women in his custody. In both the novels, the concept of justice and freedom permeates through the thin line between love and death, which is in turn, life and death.

Thakuma reminds the family "time and again that the death penalty was not just the delivery of justice but also the imprint of power" (28). It is the power exerted by the state through the legal system to its citizen who has violated a rule and committed a crime. Chetna justifies her job: "The hangman merely hangs. It is the court that orders that the condemned man be hanged by the neck till he dies." (87). Here, the hangman, the judge and the police officers are just tools of the state that punishes the culprit. Chetna's father, who has committed two gruesome murders in his own family admits his crime instantly. Also his sense of justice is very strong. He admits: "I should not have done it. But I have done it. The only message I can send society now is that of my bowed head." (372). Here, he proves to be a faithful servant of patriarchy and its institutions by accepting the crime he has done. On the other hand, he is proud and clear in front of his conscience to be able to eliminate the woman who has committed a 'disgraceful' activity in the family, even though which ended up in him killing his own brother, leaving his two nieces orphaned. Therefore, it is also important to understand the gendered, hypocritical justice he has inculcated.

Das, in *The Gospel of Yudas*, identifies himself as a traitor and believes that he doesn't deserve justice in his life. Once he was committed to serve social justice. In his own words: "Realising humankind's capacity for malice, greed and cruelty troubled our conscience. But turning a blind eye to all that would've been a bigger sin. That is what set me off on this path" (*The Gospel of Yudas* 26). He reiterates about his ideology and dreams: "Our goal was to rid this world of injustice. We longed for a fertile earth, clean air and pure water." (46). Once Das and team were caught and sent to the infamous police camp for questioning and torture, he couldn't stop himself from spilling out the truths while seeing his beloved Sunanda being brutally harassed. He regrets his whole life for that; for letting down Sunanda by giving up on his ideology. For Sunanda, her cause was above everything; even above her own life and dignity. Das couldn't forgive himself: "I have betrayed a movement... couldn't do justice to the trust a lady had in me" (74). This unbearable guilt makes him an insomniac diver, who recovers dead bodies from the village lake, which symbolises his search for his own dead alter ego.

This study has selected two translated novels written by K. R. Meera, one of the most read Malayali writers and an impeccable icon of female sensibility to interpret the concept of transformative justice from a philosophical, female perspective. It is commendable that the novels are not losing its essence in translation. As Sriram points out, "If anything, it proves that with all translations, there hangs a textured rope of a twice-born tale, and so the credit for its clear flow of text, nuanced turn of phrase and even the occasional clunkiness of utterance deserves to be shared by both author and translator alike."<sup>18</sup> When the Malayalam title *Aarachar* doesn't reveal the phrase's gender identity, the translation *Hangwoman*, clearly ascribes the title role to the protagonist Chetna Grddha Mullick. The convict was hanged for raping and killing a six year old girl child, and before he is being hanged, Chetna tells him a story upon his request. She takes the form of a fierce, destructive goddess as well as a forgiving, compassionate mother at the same time while commemorating the final act. The novel also explores the human side of the inhuman criminal and the inhuman elements in most of the characters in the novel. This unravels the deeper layers of violence and injustices being infested and perpetuated silently. Towards the end, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, symbolising a phallic shaped male authority is being hanged or suspended from its existence by a feminine noose created by Chetna.

*The Gospel of Yudas* ends with the imagery of Prema staying awake near a sleeping Das, never to lose him again. Here, Prema remains as the watchdog of justice where Das, who symbolises all of our failed, insomniac consciences, can finally sleep peacefully under that reassurance and security. Prema, thus figuratively represents the lady justice who keeps her eyes open and vigil. In effect, both the novels rediscover justice as existential and experiential, and implement its feminist perspective which is transformative, holistic and poetic.

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