

Exploring the Self: Power, Resistance and Liberation in K.R Meera's *Hangwoman*

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Ashila Shirin

*Ph.D Scholar, Department of English
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

Aiswarya S. Babu

*Associate Professor, Department of English
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

Abstract

In K.R. Meera's Hangwoman: Everybody Loves a Good Hanging, the female protagonist, Chetna Grdhha Mullick, embarks on a profound journey of self-discovery amidst a complex web of power relations and societal expectations. Employing Michel Foucault's concept of "critique" as a theoretical framework, this paper explores Chetna's negotiation with her multiple selves and the external forces that shape her identity and lead to her ultimate liberation. Initially an ordinary woman, Chetna's life takes a drastic turn when she is appointed as India's first hangwoman, compelling her to adopt a bold persona in the face of societal scrutiny and patriarchy's condemnation. The power structures simultaneously grant and deprive her of agency and thus she is forced to seek ways of resistance to navigate through the power relations. Delving into the theme of sadomasochism prevalent in the text, the paper observes that the protagonist's engagement in pleasure-seeking acts of violence is one way of marking her resistance, culminating in a pivotal moment where Chetna attains catharsis thereby leading her fragmented identities to converge and form a unified whole.

Keywords: Self-Other, Power, Foucauldian Critique, Sadomasochism, Identity.

The negotiation of identity within oppressive power structures is a dynamic process shaped by subjugation, resistance, and transformation. Through the lens of Michel Foucault's 'critique', this paper explores the complex interplay of power, resistance, and identity formation, focusing on how fragmented selves navigate and reconcile their existence within systems of control. K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman: Everybody Loves a Good Hanging*, translated from Malayalam by J. Devika, presents a compelling narrative of India's first female executioner, Chetna Grdhha Mullick. The novel traces Chetna's transformation from an ordinary young woman to a hangwoman, as she negotiates power, confronts societal expectations, and grapples with multiple, often conflicting, identities.

Central to the paper's analysis is the exploration of how violence serves as both a destructive and constructive force in reshaping Chetna's sense of self. Of particular interest is the novel's treatment

of sadomasochism as a transformative mechanism of resistance and liberation, as the narrative unfolds through characters who find themselves entangled in pleasure-seeking acts of violence. Through this multifaceted analysis, the study illuminates how power, identity, and violence intersect in the process of self-discovery and liberation.

This study examines three fundamental questions about identity, power, and resistance in *Hangwoman*. The first research question investigates how Chetna navigates and negotiates her multiple identities within existing power structures. As the novel progresses, Chetna finds herself increasingly unable to identify who she is becoming, her subjectivity strangled by various power structures. This question explores how these fragmented identities interact with external ‘others’ and examines the dynamic relationship between her various selves as they conflict and coexist throughout her journey.

The second research question analyzes how power structures shape and fragment Chetna’s identity. This inquiry examines the influence of various forms of power - institutional, patriarchal, social, and personal - on Chetna’s evolving sense of self. Of particular interest is how these structures simultaneously grant and strip away her agency, compelling her to develop multiple identities as survival mechanisms. The question also scrutinizes how power dynamics in her relationships, especially with her father and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, contribute to this fragmentation of self.

The third research question explores how sadomasochism functions as a mechanism of resistance and liberation in the novel. This investigation examines how pleasure-seeking acts of violence serve dual roles as tools of oppression and means of resistance. Central to this inquiry is Chetna’s complex relationship with Mitra, where desire and violence become inextricably intertwined, culminating in her final act of execution as a form of liberation. The question further examines how these sadomasochistic dynamics reflect and challenge broader power relations in society.

The research objectives of this study are threefold. First, it aims to analyze the formation and negotiation of multiple selves in response to external power structures, as seen in *Hangwoman*. By drawing on Foucault’s theories, the study examines how the protagonist, Chetna, navigates her identity within a complex socio-political landscape marked by oppression and resistance. Second, it seeks to examine the various manifestations of power and resistance in the novel, particularly through Chetna’s interactions with institutional authority, media sensationalism, and patriarchal forces. The study explores how these structures attempt to shape her subjectivity and how she, in turn, resists and reclaims agency.

Third, it investigates sadomasochism as a transformative strategy of liberation, analyzing how acts of submission and defiance become tools for self-empowerment. The study employs Foucault’s concepts of ‘critique’ and ‘power’ to examine how Chetna overcomes multi-layered othering in society. Foucault’s idea of ‘critique’ as an attitude that adopts “the art of not being governed quite so much” provides a framework for understanding how individuals navigate power relations (45). This theoretical approach centers on questioning how we are governed, examines how power relations shape our lives, explores spaces for resistance within existing power structures, and analyzes the relationship between power and identity formation (31). The paper observes that until the point of execution, Chetna was being governed and controlled by various institutions and social structures intervening in her behavior and identity. The paper discovers the multiple layers of power dynamics that affect Chetna including media manipulation, patriarchal control, institutional power, and controlling personal relationships.

The media alternately elevates and diminishes Chetna, presenting her as both an icon of female empowerment and a spectacle. They create a public persona that often conflicts with her private self, forcing her to navigate between these manufactured identities. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra being the face of the media manipulation rattles Chetna’s confidence with one question at the beginning

of the novel, “This is work that can throw even men off balance. Do you think that a woman like you, Chetna, is capable of it?” (Meera 87). He tries to question her morality asking whether the hangwoman profession makes her a murderer (87). The same man applauds her for becoming history only to claim in the very next moment that women, in general, fear history (189).

Though Chetna was aware of the mechanizations of power, she struggled a lot to cope with this governmentalisation. Though she ends up falling prey to Mitra’s game of contempt and arrogance, most often she manages to gain clarity of her position and comments that there is nothing a woman can’t do and that she is just an instrument working for the government’s court of law (Meera 87). Mitra, at times, portrays Chetna as a mad woman and says she and women in general can’t take a decision (270-271).

People in power, like Mitra, strategically manipulate Chetna’s autonomy for their own advantage. They would performatively grant her moments of independence, only to systematically undermine and strip away her agency over both mind and body. Their strategy involved superficially celebrating her as an emblem of female empowerment, while simultaneously making it clear this was merely a facade of political correctness - beneath it, they viewed and treated her as nothing more than a vulnerable woman who must defer to the supposedly benevolent male authorities surrounding her.

In this perpetual game of loss and gain, every bit of autonomy stripped from Chetna is translated into more control for these male figures, who manipulate the situation to maintain their dominance. Mitra was the one who approached Chetna with romantic interests but he twisted truths in his favor whenever the situation demanded it. For instance, when Chetna refuses to go ahead with the marriage plans, Mitra asks her “Why then did you give me hope, Chetna? Why did you let me kiss you? Why did you come to my bedroom?” (Meera 281).

He behaves as though Chetna was the one who pursued him romantically, made the decision to marry early, and is now calling it off. He feigns surprise, acting as if she had full control over him and has now turned him into a victim, when in reality, the opposite is true—Chetna is the one who is trapped in his manipulative power games, played solely for his own benefit. He constantly reminds her that everything she has become is because of him, insisting that he is responsible for her fame and financial success (Meera 285). He frames his actions as a duty to improve her quality of life, reinforcing his control over her under the guise of generosity.

It was implied that Chetna became a symbol of female empowerment only because he allowed her to be. He made decisions for her, on her behalf, as none of these patriarchal figures found her capable of surviving on her own. Chetna acknowledges the corrupt power dynamics he engages in, particularly when she states: “A deep enmity towards Sanjeev Kumar Mitra surfaced. He controlled the death of Jatindranath Banerjee. As well as the lives of those who were to kill him... Each person inside this house of ours was under his thumb” (Meera 294-295).

Mitra has been the one who tortured Chetna’s conflicted self the most, besides being the sole reason for her conflicted identities. Her father is another patriarchal figure accountable for the internal turmoil faced by Chetna throughout the story. He would admit once in a while that Chetna was making them proud, that she is the symbol of woman’s power for the women of the entire world (Meera 396). On the contrary, he proves himself to be no less than Mitra for he wants the supreme authority, the fame, and the credits. He says; “That’s just politically correct talk! Not practically correct, though. The fact that you are a woman and hence have many limitations is the practically correct thing” (396). He fears that if Chetna’s duty of execution goes wrong in any way their bloodline will be tainted (397). He was against her decision of taking up the title of hangwoman because he never believed that women were by any means equal to, or as capable as men.

Then, there is bureaucracy and law, that through controlling figures like the IG and the other police officers limit her liberty to be what she wants to be. They drag her to a dilemma till a point where she loses track of who she is becoming. They would constantly remind her that, the executioner's job is not something she can handle with the little education, exposure and strength that she had. There is an instance by the end of the novel where the IG threatens Chetna, "If she slips up before that huge crowd, I won't let her off easily" (Meera 404). That too, when they had mentioned from the very beginning of the novel that the only qualification for the executioner's post is that it should be a man as only men had the required presence of mind. They kept on reminding her that she won't fit in the role of an executioner and she can never be an equal to a man.

These power structures controlled Chetna in an intensely oppressive manner, compelling her to seek ways to break free and master the art of resisting governance. The first step in challenging authority and asserting full autonomy is to question established truths. Chetna begins to scrutinize every 'other' that opposes her conflicted 'self,' attempting to strip her of her identity and personal freedom. Over time, she learns to reclaim agency by embracing the title of hangwoman. The moment she is officially granted this title, she gains the confidence to strip the authoritative figures of their assumed dominance, for in the first place, she realizes that, "I suddenly gained confidence, realizing intuitively that the words of whoever speaks of death, however slight she may be, carry inflated value" and that the very same authority over death lends her an ultimate authority over everything and everybody around her (Meera 86).

Sanjeev Kumar Mitra became subordinate to her with the confirmation of her appointment as the first female executioner after all the media stunt and legal complications. Till then, she had to follow Mitra, follow his instructions, and follow him to places she couldn't enter alone. But now the hierarchy reverts and Chetna gains an upper hand becoming the hangwoman. She states, "From today, each moment of mine is yours. You must follow me with that camera of yours...I walked out, telling him to follow me" (Meera 393).

Previous scholarly work on K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman* has approached the novel from multiple angles; focusing particularly on power dynamics, identity formation, and feminist resistance. Hari M.G.'s "Negotiation of Identity in K.R Meera's *Hangwoman*" examines how power negotiations occur in private spaces, emphasizing how multiple relations lead to different subject positions. The work is significant for its exploration of how power manifests and creates spaces for resistance, showing how various power negotiations result in the creation of different subject positions for Chetna.

Malavika Thayat and Shilpa S. Nair's article titled "A Feminist Approach to *Hangwoman* by K.R. Meera" provides valuable insights into how violence functions as a means of power acquisition in the novel. Their work particularly examines the metaphorical significance of Sonagachi (the red-light district) as both an empowering and a disempowering space, where traditional power dynamics between men and women are reversed.

Jay Menon's book review, titled "*Aarachar (Hangwoman)*- Tightening the Noose Around Patriarchy" offers a unique perspective by analyzing Sanjeev Kumar Mitra as a personification of patriarchy. The review is notable for its examination of how death actively shapes the characters' strong selves and its analysis of the gendered connotations of the noose in the novel.

While existing scholarship on K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman* has explored feminist resistance and power dynamics; there remains a significant gap in understanding how multiple identities interact and ultimately converge through sadomasochistic mechanisms of resistance. Previous studies have primarily focused on binary power relations or singular aspects of identity formation, without fully examining how various "selves" and "others" coexist and conflict within the protagonist. Although

works like Hari M. G's "Negotiation of Identity in K.R Meera's *Hangwoman*" touch upon power negotiations in private spaces, they don't fully explore how sadomasochistic dynamics serve as a transformative strategy for the unification of the identity. Furthermore, while feminist readings of the text have analyzed violence as a means of power, the specific role of pleasure-seeking violent acts in identity formation and liberation remains understudied. This paper addresses these gaps by systematically analyzing the various factors shaping Chetna's incorporation of multiple identities, examining how sadomasochistic elements facilitate both resistance and liberation, and exploring how these elements ultimately lead to the convergence of fragmented identities through transformative violence.

This paper primarily intends to analyze the self-other binary, in which it is observed that multiple selves and multiple others are engaged in constant tussles with themselves and each other. Chetna's identity exists in a continual state of flux, incorporating several distinct but interconnected selves. The pre-hangwoman self represents her original identity before the transformation. She was initially presented as a naïve yet sensible young girl whose traits aligned more with traditional feminine expectations. Later by imposing the title of the female executioner, she is forced to incorporate a public persona projecting an unwavering boldness. This fragmented self was subjected to media scrutiny and public judgment and it started feeling like an 'other' to Chetna herself. She has realized that there wasn't just one self but more than one fragmented identity in conflict with each other. When Mano da fears that they will lose Chetna forever if the hanging takes place, Chetna says to herself: "I did not understand then that it was necessary to convince him there was more than one Chetna" (Meera 355). This public persona can be contrasted against her private self which struggles with internal conflicts apart from dealing with moral and ethical dilemmas. This private self battles between desiring for and hating Sanjeev Kumar Mitra.

Finally, there is the feminist consciousness within her that keeps on dying and being reborn. It can be observed that this feminist consciousness makes her oscillate between being a symbol of female empowerment and experiencing vulnerability. This particular self struggles with conflicts between societal expectations and individual feminist ideals, between tradition and modernity.

Chetna's identity formation is a continuous process of negotiation between her various selves and the corresponding others, marked by a persistent tension between public expectations and personal desires. Her identity as a hangwoman clash with the hangman as the traditional other, her role as an executioner contrast with the prisoner as the other, her strong, independent self is at odds with the collective female experience that both supports and condemns her, and her female identity is in constant conflict with the patriarchal forces around her. She struggles to reconcile her existence as both a woman and an executioner, while the surrounding power structures—including the government and bureaucracy, the institution of family, her father as a patriarchal figure, and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra as the embodiment of patriarchy—alternately grant and revoke her agency; ultimately fragmenting her identity into multiple; conflicting selves.

How she deals with the identified 'others' is where Foucault's idea of critique gains prominence as it was discussed earlier in this paper. That was the second objective of the paper – to study the role played by power structures in shaping and reshaping her identity.

The final yet quintessential objective of the paper is to analyze how sadomasochism functions as a mechanism of resistance and liberation in the novel. The novel presents sadomasochism as a complex mechanism of power and resistance which is exhibited through Chetna's simultaneous desire to kill and die as well as the eroticization of violence as both oppression and liberation. The analysis of the novel suggests that the multiple selves eventually converge in the final act of executing Mitra, where Chetna achieves a unified identity through this transformative act of violence. This unification represents not just personal catharsis but also a broader symbolic victory

over patriarchal power structures. Chetna hints at this victory at the end of the novel, when she walks out of Mitra's office, stating, "What the world gave me, I returned to it" (Meera 431).

The resistance act Chetna puts up is an act of revenge for all the humiliation, subjugation, and abuse she had to tolerate from Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. She enacts her final rebellion through a sadomasochistic act—choking to death the very man she once desired. Mitra triggers this desire in her by stating in the beginning of the novel: "I want to fuck you hard, even if only once" (Meera 27). Chetna, also, gradually started sensing that:

He was to die by my hands. That's why I was attracted to him from that very moment. He was special with that exceptional height, thick straight hair, long straight nose. It took me much longer to be convinced that the feeling I had for him was what people call love. The kinds of love that the likes of us experienced were all like the noose fixed between the third and fourth vertebrae. Either the noose tightened and the person died, or the cord broke and the person escaped. But even those who broke the cord could never completely untie the noose from their necks (19).

Sadomasochism is a portmanteau word combining sadism and masochism, that refers to the act of deriving pleasure, often of a sexual nature, from the infliction of physical or psychological pain on another person or on oneself or both as defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Sadism is deriving pleasure from inflicting pain while masochism is deriving pleasure from receiving pain. The term was coined by 19th-century neurologist Richard von Krafft Ebing- sadism in reference to Marquis de Sade and masochism in reference to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Chetna at times took turns being a sadist and masochist. She appears to be a sadist as she always had the urge to hurt and kill the man, she desired the most.

Chetna has developed a kind of affection for Mitra from the very beginning of the novel itself. Despite him trying to hurt her multiple times, verbally and physically; she couldn't understand how she still desired the presence of that man. Instances from the novel like the one where Chetna states: "I knew by then that I had not just the urge to kill but also the urge to die" suggest that she is a masochist as well (Meera 86). In their first encounter, Chetna had hinted at this sadomasochistic desire of hers when she said:

He was more handsome than I had thought. I yearned to see his eyes emerge from behind those dark glasses. I inscribed in my heart his smile, his speech, the way his wayward locks fell upon his forehead when he laughed. A noose of sheer happiness tightened around my neck. There was another noose at its tail. And another person too. A hangman's rope with two nooses! I caressed my neck in pleasure. (26)

Chetna kept on hallucinating this act of hanging him as she kept on saying that she wanted to hang him in seven hundred and twenty-seven different ways; that there was something to him that is vibrantly alive and the hangman's blood that flowed in her veins yearned for this vitality of his soul (Meera 41). The number seven hundred and twenty-seven has a symbolic relevance as it is an angel number denoting a spiritual awakening, inner wisdom and personal growth as said by Zephyra in *Spiritual Essence*. This sign indicates that Chetna was on the right path towards inner transformation and self-discovery.

A crucial aspect of Chetna's resistance emerges through sadomasochistic dynamics, particularly in her relationship with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Their interactions reveal how power, pleasure, and violence become intertwined as mechanisms of both oppression and liberation. Their relationship was characterized by a complex, volatile dynamic of sexual attraction and mutual desire, expressed through intense and often violent interactions that paradoxically brought them pleasure through acts of emotional and physical harm. While Mitra achieves this by sexually abusing her, Chetna just as she mentioned at the beginning of the novel, does so in the end by choking him to death after

tying a noose around him. Sexual choking or erotic asphyxiation is the act of choking someone else or yourself for sexual pleasure, as mentioned in *WebMD*. This choking act, for Chetna, resulted in the merging or unification of all her otherwise scattered identities as the hanging was over and both her feminine and feminist self-attained justice. She gained clarity as equality has been attained by a hangwoman successfully carrying out the task of execution just like a hangman and a balance has been maintained as all other tortured selves which were ruling, directing, and torturing the protagonist finally secured peace by taking revenge on Sanjeev Kumar Mitra.

The sadomasochistic elements in the novel serve multiple functions. They represent the complex interplay between power and pleasure in patriarchal societies, where violence becomes eroticized and resistance takes the form of turning violence back upon itself. This dynamic reaches its climax when Chetna finally executes Mitra, an act that serves as both revenge and liberation. The execution represents the ultimate fusion of power, pleasure, and justice, transforming the tools of patriarchal authority into instruments of feminine agency and resistance.

The study reveals four significant findings about identity formation and resistance in *Hangwoman*. First, identity formation occurs through constant negotiation with power structures, as evidenced by Chetna's evolving personas in response to societal pressures and expectations. Second, sadomasochistic dynamics serve a dual purpose as both mechanisms of oppression and liberation, particularly in Chetna's relationship with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Third, the unification of fragmented identities is achieved not through rejection of violence but through its conscious appropriation as a tool of liberation, culminating in the final execution scene. Fourth, resistance operates within existing power relations rather than outside them, as demonstrated by Chetna's strategic use of her position as hangwoman to challenge patriarchal authority.

The study offers significant scope in expanding our understanding of feminist resistance strategies within contemporary Indian literature, particularly in how power dynamics and identity formation intersect in postcolonial contexts. It provides a valuable framework for analyzing how characters navigate complex power structures and develop resistance mechanisms within patriarchal societies. However, the research faces several notable limitations. The primary focus on Chetna's character, while allowing for deep psychological analysis, potentially restricts broader social and cultural observations that could emerge from examining other characters' perspectives and experiences.

Additionally, since the text is translated from Malayalam to English, certain linguistic nuances, cultural contexts, and regional specificities of the original work may be lost or altered in translation, potentially affecting the depth of analysis. Finally, the study's reliance on Western theoretical frameworks like Foucault's concept of critique, while illuminating, may not fully capture or address the unique cultural and social dynamics specific to the Indian context in which the narrative is situated.

Through a detailed analysis of K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman*, this study demonstrates how identity formation occurs through complex negotiations with power structures and societal forces. Chetna's journey from an ordinary woman to India's first hangwoman reveals that resistance and liberation can emerge even through the strategic appropriation of violence and power. By examining the protagonist's navigation of multiple selves, her use of sadomasochistic dynamics as resistance, and her ultimate achievement of identity unification through transformative violence, the study contributes to our understanding of feminist resistance strategies in contemporary Indian literature. Moreover, it challenges simplistic narratives of victimhood and empowerment by revealing how identity is not a fixed construct but a dynamic, multilayered process of negotiation within existing power structures. The study ultimately illuminates how contemporary Indian literature engages with complex questions of feminist agency, power relations, and identity formation.

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