

FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE NARRATION OF HISTORY IN K. R. MEERA'S *HANGWOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate process of identity formation through the lens of feminist historiography, or Herstorography, as exemplified in K. R. Meera's novel Hangwoman. The study examines how the protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, navigates her identity crisis by reclaiming the suppressed narratives of her female ancestors. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha, Michel Foucault, and feminist historiography, the paper argues that memory and counter-memory play a pivotal role in reconstructing marginalized histories. Chetna's journey is analyzed as a process of counter-memory, where she selectively retrieves and retells the stories of her foremothers to assert her autonomy and redefine her identity in a patriarchal society. The paper concludes that feminist historiography serves as a powerful tool for reshaping identity, enabling individuals to confront historical silences and reclaim their place in the narrative of history.

Keywords: *Feminist historiography; Herstorography; Identity formation; Counter-memory; K. R. Meera; Hangwoman; Patriarchy; Marginalized histories; Gender studies*

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"We are not makers of History. We are made by History." – Martin Luther King Jr.

Though it seems simple, identity is a complicated phenomenon that may be detected through numerous expressions and sensations. This is especially true when distinguishing the self from identification, as the *self* emerges naturally while identification takes shape through external influences. An internalized cognitive framework that combines an individual's inner self with their external social surroundings into a coherent entity defines identity. This helps to clarify the idea of identity. The external environment is constantly unstable, which leads to an ever-changing process of identity development; consequently, the building process is naturally difficult. As Bhabha puts it, "Identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 51). The process of creating an identity becomes even more challenging when women must defy the dominant patriarchal setup to carve

out a niche for themselves. For this purpose, they adopt various devices, one of which is Feminist Historiography, which we may authoritatively term Herstoriorgraphy. To understand Herstoriorgraphy, let us first briefly define Historiography. Furray and Salevouris define Historiography as "the study of the way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing.... When you study historiography, you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians." (Furray & Salevouris, p. 223). Historiography assesses several elements affecting the historical record. This covers, among other things, authorship, sources of information, multiple points of view, bias, and prejudice. Michel Foucault argued further that history is a tale of power performed for and by others. This helps to understand why history has turned into a chronicle of dominance. This suggests that other marginalized groups, like women, are left out of key social institutions. Emerging as a major field, feminist historiography tackles the historical silence placed on society's most vulnerable people.

Susan Pedersen, in her address at a panel discussion on "The Future of Feminist History," states that the aim of feminist historiography is "on the one hand to recover the lives, experiences, and mentalities of women from the condescension and obscurity in which they have been so unnaturally placed, and on the other to re-examine and rewrite the entire historical narrative to reveal the construction and workings of gender." Differentiating feminist historiography from the History of Feminism helps to clarify the historical evolution of the feminist movement and Women's History, which highlights women's achievements across time. The term "feminist history" refers to an attempt to reread and recreate historical events from a feminine standpoint. As a result, a new sense of identity has emerged. "The focus on identity has necessitated a critical reassessment of—and a moral consideration for—a history that feminism has occasionally been reluctant to acknowledge," the author says. Given this background, I will now analyze K. R. Meera's novel *Hangwoman*.

K. R. Meera's work *Hangwoman* clearly demonstrates the greatness of modern literature. Originally published in Malayalam under the title *Aarachar*, Meera's work won the Sahitya Akademi Award. J. Devika translated the book into English. The twenty-two-year-old daughter of hangman Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, Chetna Grddha Mullick, tells the story. Her ancestors are the Grddha Mullick family, a hangman dynasty with two millennia of presence in Kolkata. Chetna's family consists of her mother, father, uncle (kaku), aunt (kakima), brother Ramu da, and grandmother Thakuma. The growing rarity of the death sentence has meant that Phanibhushan has been practically jobless for many years. After several years, Phanibhushan Mullick finally gets the chance to hang Jatindranath, who is accused of raping and murdering a little child. This event gives their otherwise routine life some motivation. The father of a young man executed by Phanibhushan physically attacked Ramu, Phanibhushan's son. The incident caused the amputation of Ramu's hands and legs. Phanibhushan made the decision to dedicate his dreams to his daughter, Chetna. Twelve years later, he accepted an offer of death and successfully influenced the government to

designate Chetna as his assistant and the official hangwoman. Although Chetna morally opposes the use of the death sentence, she is obliged to take on the job of a hangwoman to satisfy her father's demands. Her father wanted her to carry on the famous Grddha Mullicks' family name and line of work. The story of the hanging grabs the media's interest, drawing attention to the Mullick household. Chetna finds herself greatly attracted to television journalist Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Sometimes Sanjeev Kumar Mitra mistreats Chetna, which causes a love-hate connection between the two. Chetna starts to doubt her own identity and existence under these circumstances. She looks to her family's records, paying special attention to the women in her family, in search of a solution. She begins to remember and repeat the tales of the women in her family who were overlooked as she tries to sort out her own identity dilemma. The tales inspire her to find answers to their problems. Meera's deft narrative drives Chetna to use a historical perspective to create the identity of the underprivileged people. She may, therefore, stop her own search for identity, a quest that is naturally challenging in the fast-paced, multifarious world of the current day. Here, I would like to quote Judith A. Howard from her book *Social Psychology of Identities*: "At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent assigned, rather than selected or adopted. However, in current times, the concept of identity bears the full weight of the need for a sense of self, coupled with an often-overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts."

A major role in historiography is played by memory, as it is the only means of retrieving the neglected aspects of undocumented history. The family stories of the Grddha Mullicks are retold by Phanibhushan and his mother, Thakuma, to keep the family's place in dominant history intact and, by doing so, try to regain the respect that their family enjoyed in the past. They feel proud of their profession of imparting justice and so they keep on narrating the history of their forefathers, who performed their duty of execution to perfection. Phanibhushan grabs every given opportunity to narrate the glory of his forefathers with such perfection that Chetna remarks, "On every occasion, he says precisely what everyone longs to hear," and she longs to be as quick-witted as her father. However, Chetna's retelling of these stories differs from that of either her father or Thakuma. Thakuma explores the history of the women in the family primarily to act as a warning message to Chetna and inspire her to follow the family's patriarchal system. Chetna's stories center on the Grddha Mullicks' oppressed and exploited women, whether in their families or society. Besides, the stories she has heard provide the vitality she needs for her own existence. She is praised as a symbol of female independence when she is hired as an assistant, although she can relate to the role of assistant to her father even so. "I was thus forced to continue as the symbol of women's strength and self-respect," she says, once again under pressure from her father and Sanjeev to take part in a TV program called *Hangwoman's Diary*. Chetna starts narrating the stories at the right periods in her life, either on television or in person with Sanjeev. She delves into her family's past, unveiling the hidden details of the women who faced misdirection and suppression. She especially pays close attention to the stories that chronicle the women's personal

experiences of winning battles and developing their identities. By doing this, she seeks to define herself. Chetna's story differs from that of her father or grandmother in that she talks about her foremothers rather than the stories her father and Thakuma relate about their ancestors. Given the background of the Grddha Mullicks, she tries to relate to the women. She becomes embroiled in one of these events during the period she is shooting for the TV program *Hangwoman's Diary*. Sanjeev had mistreated Chetna during a previous visit, and she cannot pay him back for his kindness. This worries her greatly. When she relates the story of Pingalkeshini, the first hangwoman in the family, who Thakuma claims was in charge of killing a thousand men, her suppressed anger bursts forth. The woman known as Pingalkeshini urged Sultan Balban to assign her the role of hangwoman so she might punish Tughan Khan, who had exploited her modesty countless times.

When Sanjeev asks during the program why she demanded the hangwoman's job, Chetna replies, "All I can say is that some women's anger is such that it cannot be satiated with the death of just one man." Her existential dilemma is clearly visible in her statement because she has anger in her heart for Sanjeev but is unable to express it to him.

Chetna recollects the story of Chinmayi Devi, the wife of the first hangman of the family, Radharaman, who acquired Chinmayi as a reward from the king after executing her lover. Chinmayi marries Radharaman and bears his children but engulfs herself in a sea of silence forever. Radharaman was able to own her body but never her soul. Chetna finds herself in a similar situation with Sanjeev, who tries to own her body but not her soul. She relates to the predicament of Chinmayi and, through her story, learns how to confront the adverse situation she is facing in her own life. Such recollection of the past by marginalized sections is termed *counter-memory* by Vita Fortunati and Elena Lambert, who state that in gender studies, counter-memory becomes pivotal to "acts of survival," of consciousness and creativity, fundamental to the formation and rewriting of identity. Like her father, Chetna remembers and retells history provoked by specific occasions, and hence, her narration is never linear. Her narration is selective; she chooses what to narrate and what to avoid, and as Schmidt puts it, "narrating is closely connected with the construction of identity." Whenever Chetna is in a situation of crisis, her mind automatically turns to some or the other of her foremothers for the solution to her crisis. When Sanjeev tells her, "women can't take a decision" (p. 270), Chetna recollects the story of another of her ancestors, Annapurna, who became a monk, shaving her head and adorning ochre robes. Her spiritual journey starts with her smiling to herself all the time, which was not acceptable to the family and society, as "No one could believe that a woman could attain bliss by means other than her husband, children, clothes, and jewels." When Annapurna is confronted by her husband about the reason for her constant smile, she replies that she keeps thinking of Tathagata. Chetna starts doing the same with Sanjeev, and at one point, when he says to her that if she does not marry him, her father will throw her out of the house, she bursts out laughing, which irritates Sanjeev. She comes closer to establishing her identity when she realizes, "I was laughing at myself." "What a terrible loss," she reflects, "it had

taken me so long to understand Grandmother Annapurna, who fought for the freedom to abandon the home! ...Henceforth, I smiled to myself, I cannot submit to the will of the father or the lover or the husband or the children to come in the future."

Hangwoman is a fiction of memory in which feminist historiography acts as a tool for reconstructing the lost and overlooked stories of the women of Chetna's past, those stories to which she starts identifying and reshaping her own identity. By retrieving the memories of the women of history, such as Chinmayi, Pingalkeshini, Khona, and many others, she acknowledges their contribution to developing her own willpower and the construction of her own identity. Khona, considered the first female poet of Bengal, was also an astrologer of excellence who was erased from history. Chetna recollects her story while trying to gather the courage to retaliate against her father and Sanjeev when they want her to do something against her own will. Chetna's recollection of the stories of women of the past is purposeful, as she states, "Our lives are bound to each other like the links in a chain. One completes what someone else has begun in some other time. The one who begins does not ever complete it, and those who complete it do not begin it." Thus, Chetna highlights each link of this chain to achieve her own individuation and claim her own identity. To avenge the patriarchal forces on her own as well as on behalf of the women of the past, she hangs Sanjeev as a demonstration on the studio floor. She hallucinates the wronged women of the past as her witnesses. The quest for meaning and identity leads Chetna on a journey through her ancestry in search of the history of women—silenced, forgotten, or overlooked by the privileged documented versions of history. She realizes that "All of it was old, I saw with a beating heart—I, alone, was new." Her identity is determined at the end when, in a survey after she has hanged Jitendranath with perfection, ninety-three percent of the girls state that they want to become Chetna Grddha Mullick when they grow up and punish criminals. The process of recollecting and retelling the stories of the women of the past from a feminist perspective and the subsequent determination of Chetna's identity is settled, and she "...began my journey to the future..." We can rightly assert that feminist historiography enables Chetna to shape and reconstruct the past to define her identity vis-à-vis the collective identity and cultural memory when faced with an identity crisis in the present.

CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING IDENTITY THROUGH HERSTORIOGRAPHY

In *Hangwoman*, K. R. Meera masterfully employs feminist historiography to explore the intricate process of identity formation. Chetna's journey is one of self-discovery, as she delves into her family's past to uncover the stories of the women who came before her. These narratives, long silenced or forgotten, become a source of empowerment, enabling Chetna to define herself on her own terms. By the end of the novel, Chetna emerges as a symbol of female independence and

resilience, inspiring a new generation of women to challenge societal norms and assert their identities.

As Chetna reflects, "Our lives are bound to each other like the links in a chain. One completes what someone else has begun in some other time. The one who begins does not ever complete it, and those who complete it do not begin it." Through her journey, Chetna highlights each link in this chain, reclaiming the stories of her foremothers and forging her own path forward. In doing so, she not only avenges the patriarchal forces that have oppressed her but also honors the legacy of the women who came before her. We can rightly assert that feminist historiography enables Chetna to shape and reconstruct the past to define her identity vis-à-vis the collective identity and cultural memory when faced with an identity crisis in the present.

Ultimately, *Hangwoman* demonstrates the transformative power of feminist historiography in reshaping identity. By reconstructing the past from a feminine perspective, Chetna is able to define herself in relation to her collective identity and cultural memory, resolving her identity crisis and embarking on a journey toward a more empowered future. As the novel concludes, Chetna's story serves as a testament to the enduring strength and resilience of women, both past and present.

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