

Reading the Construction of Mediated-Reality in K.R.Meera's *Hangwoman*

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Abstract: The sovereign state's power to take away the life of a convict through a judicial process raises many questions. Judiciary, being one of the pillars of the constitution passes the decree and it is carried out by the executives. In this sense a hangman is also an executive of the government. The story of one such hangman and his lineage forms the central theme of the novel *Hangwoman*, originally written in Malayalam as *Arachaar* by K.R Meera. This narrative finds its expression in English through the translation of it by J.Devika. The job of hanging and how the family of Phanibhushan Griddha Mullick inherited this occupation is narrated through a series of memories recollected by Thakuma, the grandmother and her son Phanibhushan Mullick. The successor of this profession after Griddha Mullick happened to be Chetana Griddha Mullick who is celebrated by the media as the most powerful woman. The debates on TV with the first ever hangwoman and the proceedings of hanging a convict called Jatindranath Banerjee are central to the narrative. The role of a media person questioning the profession and the act of hanging is also woven into this narrative. However, the onus of killing someone to maintain law and order involves many other factors like availability of a hangman and fulfilling the demands of him or her. This novel describes how ChetanaGriddhaMullick assays the role of a hangwoman. The young girl who has passed twelfth grade and could not go to college due to poverty is forced into it by her father and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra the media person. The drama then unfolds in the CNC channel studio between Sanjeev Kumar Mitra and ChetanaGriddhaMullick. There is a sense of knowledge and reality that the viewers are forced into regarding the debate of death penalty and the hangman's duty. This reality is a mediated reality and the construction of it takes place in the studio. The legacy of the hangman's family is historicised through the grandmother and these memories that would otherwise die with her has been handed down to her heirs PhanibhushanGriddhaMullick and ChetanaGridhhaMullick. This paper attempts to read how reality and history are mediated through the characters in the novel.

Keywords: *Hangwoman*, *mediated-reality*, *historicise*, *hangman*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian literatures written by women is gaining momentum both in English and in *bhashas*. It is also recognised through awards and prizes and through the various literary festivals across the country. One such powerful voice in Malayalam is K.R.Meera, the Sahitya Academy award winner for her novel *Arachaar*. This was translated in English by J.Devika as *Hangwoman*. The story of this novel is set in Bengal and traces the history of the Mullicks who have been professional hangmen. The novel opens with the rejection of the mercy petition of a convict who is to be hanged for raping and murdering a young girl. The family of Phanibhushan Griddha Mullick celebrates this rejection as they have been

jobless for many years and this would be a source of income for them.

Phanibhushan Griddha Mullick is eighty-five years old and does not have much time left to negotiate his demands with the government. The hanging of Jatindranath Banerjee should happen for two reasons. One, they need money and then they have to preserve the legacy of the family by finding an heir to him. His only son Ramdev was cruelly attacked by one of the convicts' father that left him maimed and bed-ridden for the rest of his life. The other person in the family is Phanibhushan's brother SukhdevGriddhaMullick who is not capable of killing even a chicken (in his brother's words). Hence the only choice left is ChetanaGriddhaMullick, Phanibhushan's daughter. He did not think about it before but when it was suggested by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra a TV anchor on his programme, he decided that his daughter would be next in line. He then passes the responsibility of appointing her as a hangwoman as the government's obligation for his services. The ministers cannot believe that a father would do this to his daughter. The question of what will happen to her if she becomes a hangwoman and who will marry her are all easily swayed by the father.

Sanjeev Kumar Mitra makes use of this opportunity to broadcast a program on his CNC channel called *Hangwoman's Diary*. He also makes use of this opportunity to take liberties with Phanibhushan's greed and the young girl's vulnerability. He pays the father a meagre sum and signs a contract that ChetanaMullick would be appearing for the show everyday till the hanging and that only CNC channel has the right to cover the event of hanging on the last two days. These things just automatically fall in place and Chetana has to go to the studio helplessly caught between her father and her love Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. It is through the discussion on this programme that we know how the debate of death penalty is mediated and constructed by the anchor.

Social Constructionism:

Social construction of reality is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the development of jointly constructed understanding of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality. One of the ways in which we as viewers make sense of this world is through the reality constructed by the media. Theories in mass communication elaborate the influence of the media on viewers under three categories Bandura's Social learning theory throws light on how media consumers can learn appropriate societal actions. Gerbner's Social Cultivation theory emphasises on how people line their views of the world with those presented in the media. McComb's & Shaw further enhances these theories to prove how media dictates the importance of issues and events to the public. This persuasion of the media of what to think about an issue is what we call social construction theory of reality.

Mediated-Reality in *Hangwoman*:**Memory and History**

There are three levels of mediation that happens in the novel. These run parallel in the narrative and constructs reality to the readers. The grandmother who is over hundred years old recollects from her memory the history of her family and the number of great grandfathers and great granduncles who had enjoyed royal privileges. These memories are retained in a gold coin that she has preserved as a token for so many years. It also handed down in the form tales to her son PhanibhushanMullick and granddaughter ChetanaMullick. Both these characters draw their strength and courage to hang from these tales of the GriddhaMullick legacy. Thus the tales and her personal memory becomes history of a time and place which counters social history, these are telling from a wife, mother, daughter, niece, grandmother all embodied into one grand narrative. She has heard and seen all this from the hangmen in the family. One such instance is cited here and dates back to centuries-

Thakuma, Bhuvanewari Devi, would remind us time and again that the death penalty was not just delivery of justice but also the imprint of power. The evidence of this was in the stories about GrandfatherBhishmaGriddhaMullick. He lived during the reign of the eighth-century Pala kings. The first Pala king, Gopala, was elected to kingship by his people. The land flourished and peace prevailed under these rulers who were Mahayana Buddhists. But the credit for this blissful state of affairs actually belonged to our forbearer's genius. More deft and precise than a master butcher, he despatched hundreds of people everyday through beheadings and hangings". (Devika, 28)

We see how memory intermediates between the past and the present. As Jose Van Dick recounts, "Historians and social scientists have theorised individual memory primarily as a particularised view on grand narratives of history; they tend to value individual memories only as retrospective angles on, or as representations of, collective history. Therefore personal memory is a cultural phenomenon that encompasses both the activities and products of remembering".

It is important to note that how she could remember so many tales and recollect them so spontaneously that she seems to be living in the past and links the family tradition to the present. There is a deliberate discursion of history through her tales which is evident in her remembering very important convicts whom the hangmen were hesitant to hang but have to go on with their duty. In these stories of the hangmen of different ages and generations, the story of Bengal is also interwoven. Ratnamalika's story is very tragic but it is also an example of how the family history is interwoven with that of the nation. As a member of the family in thirteenth century she was tied to a pillar for her rebellious behaviour. She predicted that eighteen mounted soldiers led by a foreigner will land in Vanga. And on the seventh day after this Muhammed Bin BakhtyarKhilji attacked Bengal with just eighteen horsemen and captured Gaur and Nabadwip. (Devika, 124).

The *Jatra* and Hanging

The act of hanging or the performance of a hangman and the performance in the *jatra* are one and the same for PhanibhushanMullick. He escapes the reality of killing and hanging the convicts by comparing it to a performance in *ajatra*. For him a noose would tighten around his neck when he walks upto the stage. He is not himself on stage and while

hanging he seem to get into a character and mediate the reality of hanging. In his own words as narrated in Chapter 21,

"My last major role in a *jatra* was in Ma Mati Manush. That was in 1975. Mother Land Man that's what it means. The land is like Mother, SanjuBabu. The history of Bengal....why, all of India...is about the struggle for land..." (Devika, 166)

The contribution of *jatra* performances in the political upheavals of Bengal is significant and this form of theatre is almost activism that it has created a lot of unrest in Bengal. The memory of being a *jatra* performer is what makes PhanibhushanGriddhaMullick perform the task of hanging so effortlessly that he constantly boasts of hanging four hundred and fifty one convicts and takes pride in it. He seems to have mediated the reality through stage and has no qualms to argue about the ethics of his profession. He again goes on to say how the performance is him,

"But when I went up the stage, it was exactly the reverse. I would always feel a noose tighten around my neck. There would always be a struggle with death, a brief one, lasting just five or ten seconds. And I would dissolve. I always delivered my dialogues like gunfire, people say. But to tell you the truth, I can never remember what I said or did on stage. After the first piece of dialogue, I ceased to be PhanibhushanGriddhaMullick. Sanjubabu, I think that I hang myself at that moment only to be reborn as the character I play." (Devika, 166-167)

Media-Hype and Death Penalty

The most important mediation of reality is constructed through a TV program *Hangwoman's Diary* in CNC channel. The anchor Sanjeev Kumar Mitra seems to question the ethics of hanging and an educated woman like Chetana accepting the family profession through the program. He seemed to be interested in this whole debate only for the ratings of his channel and compromises to even marry Chetana although the relationship between the two is a complex love-hate affair. The crew and camera of the channel follows Chetana through all her official meetings. SanjeevkumarMitra finds the hanging of Jatindranath Banerjee as a viable subject for media-discussion especially when the person officiating it is a hangwoman ChetanaGriddhaMullick.

"Chetanas's time, henceforth, must be exclusively for our channel. She must not speak to other newspapers or TV channels. Wherever she goes we will go with her.... till the eve of the hanging". (Devika, 52)

Each show of this programme is raking up pertinent questions which are tackled well by Chetana, if her father is performing in the *jatra*, she is doing it in the studios of CNC channel. The gift of gab that her father is endowed with is perhaps inherited by her. Her stories on the show are enhanced with Thakuma's tales from the GriddhaMullick family. One of occasions where she is asked about killing and sin she curtly answers thus,

"Doesn't the sense of sin at having to kill another human being bother you?"

I don't kill, I merely pull the lever." (Devika, 87)

Sanjeev Kumar Mitra as a gatekeeper of the program decides what should be discussed and what should not be part of the discussion. When Chetana raises the question of how poverty is linked with crime and notes that all the four hundred fifty one convicts that her father has hung were poor and did not have money to pay to lawyers. Hence the mediation

through the channel could not bring out the true spirit of a hangwoman. The sympathy and care that she expresses when she remembers some of the helpless convicts conclude that she is forced to take the profession to provide for the family. One of the convict's mother on the show did not play to the expected level of performance. Seventy year old Protima Ghosh whose son was the last to be hanged reacted extra ordinarily when she was asked if death penalty should be abolished. She replied.

“My view is that it should not be abolished. For people like us, it is better to be hanged to death rather than suffer for years together! I have always felt relieved that my son is no more...otherwise he would be suffering a living death today.”(Devika, 127)

The story of why her son killed six people is justified by the mother in her terms making the judicial stance very complicated and relative. Chetana also speaks in the same tone as Protima trying to reason that it is poverty that is driving them to crime.

Another interesting discussion on the show is with the convict Jatindranath Banerjee's wife –Kokila Banerjee. The script of this show is interesting because she only needs to shed tears not speak a word. She bows her folded hands to Chetana as a plea but is not allowed to say anything beyond this. Her actions on the show are also mediated by the gatekeeper Sanjeev Kumar Mitra.

All the other shows broadcasted in the channel with regard to Chetana are discussions on how to place a rope, the measurement of it and what happens if it is not knotted well. Also, it also analyses the process of hanging which has evolved through ages. Public display of hanging, to instil fear and realise the power of the rulers were gone and replaced with closed hanging. The covering of the convicts face and the tying of their hands and feet are the only changes that have taken place over time for which Chetana has explanations on the

show. This evades the central point of the programme of why we still continue the practice of hanging.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, death penalty as a judicial process continues to take place in India, and one such history of hanging is traced through one of the hangman's family. Even this history and debate is mediated in the plot. The debates among the members of the hangman's family on death penalty do not conclude with a solution that deters crime. Phanibhusan Mullick, justifies his action of killing people and is infact proud of this calling, but his daughter is not of the same opinion about killing convicts, according to her people outside the prison are equally dangerous as these criminals who are sentenced to death. Chetana Griddha Mullick seems to break the shackles of patriarchy through the noose of a hangman but even that is an entitlement given to her by the state. She is an executioner accidentally because there are no male heirs in her family. The state and the judiciary seems to be agents of her power and on her own she lacks agency. The repeated emphasis on Chetana, given by the media as the most powerful woman in India, is the major element that constructs Chetana, as a woman of power. Chetana becomes the first female hangwoman in India through the mediation and the influence of a socially constructed reality.

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