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Aarachaar as a Clarion Call for Individualism

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Abstract: The relationship between word and what it stands for may be arbitrary. But it has been tested and proved time and again that word can be more powerful than the sharpest weapon on Earth. According to the Vedic rishis, using words with discrimination and propriety is equal to honing and sharpening a weapon. This is why even men who possessed nothing but strong language and powerful rhetoric were able to make changes, positive or negative, in the world. This is also the reason why a piece of literature, written in a powerful language, always captures the attention of critics and readers. As Longinus suggests, lofty language can take a reader to the state of ecstasy. This article discusses such a powerful work of literature, which won great critical acclaim for the ideas it conveyed through a powerful language - the Malayalam novel *Aarachaar* by the renowned writer K.R Meera and translated by J. Devika under the title *Hangwoman*. The article looks into the development of the protagonist from a vulnerable woman to an opinionated and resilient individual. It also explores how a strong plot with an exemplary narrative style, unparalleled language and sound thoughts can excite the readers and affect them into challenging and expanding their perspectives.

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Introduction

K.R Meera's *Aarachaar* won several awards and laurels not long after its publication. It was written by a popular author and the novel appeared different, yet familiar to the reading public. Many of the ideas discussed within the novel were of a social nature, such as the two opinions regarding capital punishment, women empowerment, media culture etc. Yet the author was able to put them all inside a unique plot,

and rendered it through a beautiful narrative style, giving the audience a novel feeling and excitement. Being a regional hit, it was taken to further heights at the national and even International level by J. Devika through her unique translation of the work under the title *Hangwoman*. The novel is now considered a masterpiece in Malayalam literature, often compared with *Kasakhinte Ithihasam* by O.V. Vijayan, another great novel in the Malayalam literary tradition.

Focus On The 'Individual' In *Aarachaar*

Story telling is often regarded as an art. The way a story is told is equally important as the story itself. That is why narrative style is always one among the most important factors in novels and stories. There are several novels that had captivated the reader's attention and remained in their hearts forever due to the way in which those stories were told. K.R Meera's *Aarachaar* has a unique story telling style. Almost all of the chapters begin with a myth or a past event that shares some similarity or connection with what is happening in the present of the story. Those stories are insightful both for the protagonist and the readers.

The protagonist of Meera's novel is the daughter of a Hangman, a young woman named Chetna Grddha Mullick, who due to certain circumstances has been assigned the task of hanging a convict, Jatindranath Banerjee. At the beginning of the novel, Chetna is but an ordinary girl with very little exposure and knowledge. However, she is very deft in making a noose that is strong and unbreakable. Nobody had taught her that. It was a talent that she inherited from her ancestors. She was a bright student, but had to discontinue her schooling in mid way due to financial constraints. Her brother was allowed to get higher education. Since she was a girl, no one considered education as a necessary factor in her life. Such a girl, who was restrained from everything good in her life until then, suddenly became the talk of the country when she was asked to be a hangwoman, the first in the known history of India. The new role assigned to her and the experiences that came with it awakened her spirit. Transformation doesnot seem to be the suitable word to describe her change. It was an awakening itself. The individual that can think for herself and can develop her own opinions has been summoned to the surface only then. Here the author seems to be suggesting the necessity of exposing men and women to forums where they can express their opinions. Irrespective of political rights that guarantee equality in education, employment etc and policies such as reservation in the political sector, there lingers still in the consciousness of man, the thought that most women are only adept in the matters of family and domestic assignments. Chetna, in the novel, proves to be skilled not only in tying a noose, but also in conveying her ideas in a most convincing manner. In the News channel discussions, where she is invited as the guest, she lets out

her own opinions and convictions freely, which is, in fact, a call towards the empowerment of every individual. In this respect Meera also appears to be a spokesperson of the 'individual', be it a man or a woman.

Exposure alone is not enough for self-realisation. But it is the starting point. Chetna confronts challenges and persecutions by way of subjugation from several quarters initially. The major threat comes from Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, the journalist whose media tactics played a crucial role in the procurement of her job as a hangwoman. The man is arrogant, glib and so full of himself. He makes an agreement with Chetna's father to persuade her to give an interview series exclusively for his channel about the execution. What started with interviews in the studio later extends to the monitoring of her each step as the date of the execution draws nearer. Besides using her for his channel rating, he also insults her on several occasions. During their first meeting at her house, he grabs her and says to her face that he wishes to "fuck her hard" (Meera 92). On another occasion he steals an ornament from a shop and gifts it to Chetna. When she returns it to the shop, he cunningly puts the blame on her and saves his face. This incident reveals the manipulative and corrupt nature of the man. Chetna's acquaintance with him and the attraction she feels for him also helps her in her own development. The author does not force her character into a sudden maturity in her social and personal life. In the initial interviews, she airs out opinions that are demanded from her by the media. She slowly realizes the hypocrisy and insensitivity with which the media handles human affairs. Everything is measured on the basis of its emotional appeal to the audience, which impacts the media's rating and their profit. Even the tears of the hapless people are a matter of profit for the media tycoons. Through such observations and experiences, she gradually finds the strength to break the entanglements that imprisoned her, and gains the voice to speak her heart. Similarly her initial attraction towards Mr. Mitra later gives way to a mixed feeling of desire and hatred, and finally, after several experiences, she reaches a point where her dignity and self respect vanquishes her physical attraction towards this man. The same woman, who forebears Mitra's sexual assault initially, is later transformed into that woman who walks into his room with courage to have sex with him. But the latter woman frightens him and makes him weak: "The training that he had received from this world as a man reminded him that sex was the obvious outcome in such a situation. But he was afraid to take a woman who had walked into his bedroom of her own free will" (Meera 328). When Chetna finds the courage to exercise her own strength she is able to tear off the façades of Mr. Mitra and others who used to control her until then.

Death, to be sure, is the most prominent symbol in *Aarachaar*. The Mullick family lives near the Nimtala ghat, a crematorium. The Mullicks have been the hereditary hangmen of Chitpur, Kolkata. Chetna's father

Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, who is 88, has done 451 hangings, all by himself. But with fewer hangings happening in the present time, the family has fallen on hard times and they manage to make their living by selling tea to the bereaved. Succinctly, the family thrives on death. Chetna has been an expert in making noose from a very young age. An incident in the novel narrates how a child in the neighborhood accidentally hanged himself in the noose made by Chetna, while playing. She as a child had to witness the death of her elder sister by hanging. These incidents, especially the death of the child, had been traumatic for her. But later, death turns out to be her liberator. The hanging of Mr. Banerjee by her hands gave her an indefinable courage to withstand any challenge that can come on her way:

Just like the gallows, I burst out laughing. The grains of sand made a grating sound inside the silk cloth. I had it tight with hands slimy with death. Thus my name and my life became undying in Bharat and the whole world, in the name of love, soil and death. I knew well that no one would stop me. Rain, soil, light and history stood waiting for me.” (Meera 420)

This is clearly not the eccentricity of a person who killed somebody. She even kissed Mr. Banerjee before hanging him and said a prayer for his soul. So the happiness was due to the realization of the strength she possessed, which so far had been unknown to her. She wasn't sure whether she could fulfill the task until the moment of the task itself. Many people around and afar her doubted the same. But she did it with a level of perfection which even her father had never dreamt possible, and this strength of her own person invigorated her beyond measure. She became her own champion and an inspiration to all the individuals, not only women, around the world.

K.R. Meera has always been an admirer of Russian literature. That may be the reason why she shares some of the literary traits found in Russian writers. At no point the reader feels that the author or narrator is forcing her opinion on him or her, though different matters of social importance are discussed within the novel. Instead of being partial to any particular perspective or stand on a matter, the author allows an equal voice to different opinions. A subject has different sides to it. Ten people may look at it in ten different ways. The author has tried her best to accommodate various opinions and perspectives on particular matters, leaving space to the readers to form their own opinions from such discussions. This is an attitude that the celebrated Russian writer Leo Tolstoy is particularly famous for. Almost all of Tolstoy's works are masterpieces, and his novels are lengthy. The plot may not be too complicated, but the thoughts shared and matters discussed are many. His characters are realistic and opinionated. A peasant in his novel talks,

shares his concerns and opinions, exactly like a peasant and a noble do these things exactly like a noble. A person who doesn't know the background of the author will never guess his social position from his work, because he is so impeccable in characterisation in his works. Similarly in *Aarachaar*, the reader will find it impossible to understand the author's opinion in social and political matters discussed within it. For instance, there are two major viewpoints regarding the capital punishment. One side supports it and the other dismisses it as an archaic and senseless way of executing justice. K. R Meera gives voice to both the sides without ever letting her personal feeling interfere with the readers in forming an opinion for themselves. This is a quality that is highly noteworthy in a writer, because it requires great skill, thorough knowledge and a highly expanded world view to be such a one. It must be said that, while shaping her characters into strong individuals, the author also extends the courtesy to her readers to exercise their own individualism.

Conclusion

While stressing on the importance that Meera gives to the 'individual', it is also essential to mention that she is not against collectivism where it is required. But during situations where power interferes to propagate its calculated motives, it becomes important to hold fast to our subjectivity to protect ourselves from being wiped away by its seiche. After the execution, when Mr. Mitra tricks Chetna into coming to the studio in order to mock the execution that she did minutes ago, she turns the table against him and quite tactfully lures him into playing the convict and tied the noose around him and tightened it, giving him a taste of death. This action, carried out in a studio, in a programme that is aired live, is a vindication of the strength and subjectivity that she received through her experiences. The novel ends with this incident, which can be regarded as the ultimate celebration of a person's individual strength and self confidence.

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