

Reading K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman* as a Critique of Biopolitical Control

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"It is not women who fear history; it is history that fears women. That's why there are so few of them in it."
(*Hangwoman*, 189)

In her influential book *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), Luce Irigaray asserts that modern society is premised upon the exchange of women in a "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" controlled by heterosexual men (Irigaray, 170-171). In homosocial economies, women only function as objects of exchange and their 'utility' is limited to fulfilling sexual roles and reproductive work. In K.R. Meera's novel *Hangwoman* (2015), the red-light district of Sonagachi, a mile away from the neighborhood of Chitpur in North Kolkata where the novel is set, is a spectral presence. The roles of women in Meera's novel are intimately tied to the terrible reality of the brothels in Sonagachi as well as with the general poverty in the neighborhood. This essay examines *Hangwoman* as a critique of the patriarchal homo-social economy of exchange in India which does not allow women to embody non-gestational, non-objectified forms of power. It argues that the problems arising out of the coexistence of the pre-modern and the modern are distinct to the postcolonial Indian state in comparison to those of colonial modernity, with which it always needs to negotiate. Meera's novel presents to the reader some of these tensions that threaten to upend the neat biopolitical control by the state and homosocial control by patriarchal agents. Its inventive subject matter also demonstrates the complications that arise when the gendered pre-requisites of the state's ultimate authority- the power to kill- are subverted by placing it in the hands of a woman in order to allow for a re-imagination of the masculinist expectations that accompany even the lowest rung of the ladder of power.

The novel is set in 2004, and takes as its premise the capital punishment sentence accorded to Jatindranath Banerjee, accused of raping a teenage girl in 1990 (Meera, 315). The novel begins when Jatindranath's mercy petition is rejected. The protagonist of the novel is the twenty-two-year-old Chetna 'Grdhha' Mullick, whose ancestors have been the official hangmen since the rule of the Nanda kings in Bengal around 420 B.C. (11). Her eighty-eight-year-old father, Phanibhushan Grdhha Mullick is the official hangman of Bengal and has not had the opportunity to put his skills to use in the past four-five years due to the unfavourability that capital punishment has acquired in discourses around human rights and reformative and reparative justice. The word *grdhha* means vulture in Bengali and is attributed to her hangmen ancestors because of their "rounded, bulging eyes and thick eyelids" (33) that "reflect the hunger of vultures" (5). That vultures are responsible for maintaining an ecological balance and reducing disease- transmission is particularly relevant in order to develop an understanding of the role that hangmen have played in the context of Bengal. This pride is evident in Phanibhushan, or Phani, and his mother, or Chetna's *thakuma*, both of whom do not let go of an opportunity to narrate the story of one 'illustrious' ancestor or another. Phani has performed 455

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executions in his lifetime, but a majority of that number has occurred in the last few years of the British rule. However, his occupation has had a significant impact on his family. His son Ramu, a budding footballer, was left crippled by the father of the last person he executed, Amartya Ghosh. His younger brother Sudev also stays in the same dingy house with his family. Unlike Phanibhushan's self-displayed machismo, Sudev is docile, a far cry from his earlier days as a revolutionary. Women, including Chetna's mother, her older sister Niharika, who had committed suicide many years ago and Sudev's wife, are limited to the realm of the domestic. When Phanibhushan is interviewed by a young and influential journalist Sanjeev Kumar Mitra about his latest employment, he demands that a member from his family be given a full-time government job since they barely have any income due to the dearth of hangings. A question asked by Sanjeev on the ability of his daughter to carry forth the familial legacy leads Phanibhushan to declare that Chetna would be fit as the next hangman and the first hangwoman in the world in the modern period. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra secures a contract with her family on exclusive access to her for a month leading up to the date announced for the hanging, which includes a recurring interview feature for his channel 'CNC' titled '*Hangwoman's Diary*' (68). The novel traces Chetna's struggles in trying to adjust with her family's legacy without female precursors as well as her uneasiness in being utilized as a selling point for the Television Ratings of Programs (TRPs) by Sanjeev's channel and by her father for his own benefits. Added to this is her terse continuous battle over power in her complicated relationship with Sanjeev. Despite being hailed as an icon for women's empowerment, she does not have much agency in choosing her profession and she struggles to find a balance between the stark contrast that she sees between her own position in the discourse around death penalty and the manner in which her image is projected to the world by the news channel. She also tries to maintain a dignified stance about her own profession and her personal views about the ethical issues surrounding the death penalty. This essay examines the ways in which Chetna's unique position complicates the established gender and power hierarchies within the novel as well as in the context of the postcolonial Indian state. It explicates the tensions that arise when established codes of masculinity, especially their role in perpetuating social hierarchies, are shattered or subverted. It also discusses the ways in which Meera's novel contributes to the struggle between tradition and modernity that is faced by the postcolonial female subject. By highlighting the distinction of Chetna's experiences with modernity from the ways in which western conceptions of modernity have played out, this essay examines the distinct manner in which the protagonist chooses to narrate her stories. It juxtaposes her situation with those of other women in her family as well as in Sonagachi. It thus looks at the pervasive presence of violence and the macabre disposition of hangmen, especially in their comfort with death.

The essay is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the novel as a critique of the state's biopolitical control. It suggests that western discourses around biopolitics are of limited use in the postcolonial scenario and discusses how Meera's novel illustrates the peculiarities of its larger socio-political context. It details the role that violence plays in the novel, whether it be used as an instrument of oppression by men to retain control over situations or as an instrument of resistance by Chetna. In the second part, the essay looks at the ways in which Chetna constructs her own genealogy of female ancestors and role models. Finally, it discusses the skillful manner in which storytelling and the metaphor of the noose are employed by the protagonist as acts of identity formation and resistance.

I

"If women want to stand up straight, they should be willing to bend occasionally." (Meera, 393)

In her book *Politics of Time* (2007), Prathama Banerjee argues that unlike European modernity that operated by transporting its internal antagonisms to distant lands, the colonized subcontinent has had to accommodate the modern and the pre-modern simultaneously (Banerjee, 4). The colonized population's own constitution as 'backward' prevents them from externalizing the 'primitive' in the manner that the colonizer has sought to do. This accommodation has not been easy, primarily because modernity appears as an advantage that the posterior has over the prior due to its advanced position in time (Banerjee, 4). According to Banerjee, the postcolonial state, itself implicated in the 'post'-ness, has to negotiate with "always already colonial modernity" because any attempt at being modern needs to admit a temporality that becomes possible only with colonialism (Banerjee, 9). Colonial modernity sought to premise nation states on political rather than geographical identity. Thus, the British in India encountered problems of governance due to the abundance of regional legal justice systems that flourished on account of the lack of a distinct political identity across the subcontinent. The conceptions of justice predate colonial modernity. As a result, though the modern Indian legal-justice system has to negotiate with and accommodate its colonial antecedents, it still retains the often-paradoxical legal aspects that are singular and have persisted outside the chronological historicism that has been imposed by colonial modernity.

In his 1975-76 lectures titled "Society Must Be Defended", Michel Foucault argued that before the end of the eighteenth century, the sovereign right over life manifested in the form of legal executions, whereas, after the end of the eighteenth century, it extended over biological existence rather than death. Or, as he stated, the sovereign juridical right "to let live and make die" changed to "make live and let die" (Foucault, 2003, 241). The shift from sovereign power to biopolitical control can arguably be seen as a feature of modernity. However, as Banerjee has illustrated, the context of the Indian postcolonial state is different. First, the admittance to the historicism is a fairly recent feature. While the externalization of the 'primitive' is neither possible nor desirable or ethical, it is also difficult to submit the histories of the subcontinental region to the historicism that has made modernity an essential part of contemporary Western thought. With a disavowal of narratives premised upon 'progress', it is also difficult to trace the history of the subcontinent in a chronological trajectory that may have been possible in the case of the West. As a result, there are certain juridical features of the pre-modern, pre-colonial justice systems that are prevalent even in the contemporary Indian state. Legal executions, otherwise called capital punishment or the death penalty, are an excellent example. If Chetna's family-antecedents are to be believed, the first hangman of her family, Radharaman Mullick, worked around 426 B.C. Therefore, the journey from Radharaman Mullick to Chetna Mullick cannot be traced through a narrative of progress that is a feature of modernity. The justice system has similarly moved from being geographically determined to being politically determined and thus, cannot be seen as parallel to the colonial systems, even though it has to negotiate with colonial modernity in the postcolonial context.

While Foucault suggested in his broader philosophical framework that biopolitics envisions death not only as the execution of the individual but also the bio-pathology of the population, Giorgio Agamben suggested that the premise of democratic "rights" is itself biopolitical; thus, the termination of the Jewish population in the Nazi camps is a

logical conclusion to the narratives about democratic rights (Agamben, 134-135). According to Agamben, the state has the right to make decisions about which populations are 'worthy' of living and which should die, as seen during the Jewish genocide. Thus, he states that the camp (and not the city) is the site of democratic political engagements. One may add to Agamben's argument by suggesting that despite the outcry over civil and democratic rights, the predominance of the late modern neoliberal and capitalist state has been concomitant with the state's use of discipline as well as biopolitical and *necropolitical* power. As is evident from the term, necropolitical power inflects biopolitics with a death-oriented interpretation. Modernity carries within itself a paradox since it allows modern states to retain the right to kill in various ways. In Meera's novel, prisons and houses are not the only sites of death; deaths frequently occur on the roads as well as in farms. Narratives around death also prevail in the newsroom, not because the ethical and philosophical implications of death can be discussed, but in order that these narratives can be sold to generate profit. The modern state does not "make live and make die" rather, it *makes die and lets die*. This is evident in the novel during the famine at Amlasole that leads to the death of thousands of people due to starvation and government (ir)responsibility (142). Yet, despite the death-driven policies of the state, it paradoxically does not want to be associated with death in the public realm; thus, only one kind of death, that of the criminal, is sensationalized. The state does not want to be held accountable for either categories so, it blames the execution of the criminal on himself and those of the starving population on their own ignorance. The images of the starving children are of limited use for a news channel that thrives not on political accountability but on profit-making. This creates conditions for Chetna to become a "symbol of strength and self-respect to the whole world" (71), a convenient distraction from the state's apathy. When the modern state has the right to kill, hangmen have little use except as distractions for the public so that its own workings can be concealed from them.

Feminist theorists have taken umbrage with Agamben's death-inflected interpretation of biopolitics by contending that the modern state also controls women's bodies, sexuality and reproduction. Ann Stoler claims that the gendered and racial body of biopolitical regulation appeared simultaneously in the concentration camp *and* in the colony (Stoler, 2002, 146-147). By describing the colony as the "laboratory of modernity" and by setting aside Agamben's biopolitics-as-mass-death argument, Stoler suggests an interpretation of biopolitics as sexual-and-reproductive-regulation on women's bodies (Stoler, 1995, 40-41; Miller, 65). It may be argued that the Indian state has also combined biopolitical and necropolitical control to ensure that patriarchal hegemony and parochial attitudes govern the lived experiences of the Other(s)- women, non-heteronormative genders and disadvantaged communities.

The quote at the beginning of this part in the present essay is the advice given to Chetna by her grandmother. Women's existence is dependent on their ability to bend occasionally. If they fail to do so, they are killed, beaten or forced to die. The primary example is Chetna's older sister Niharika, who committed suicide because she was prohibited by her father to pursue a relationship with an idol-maker due to their caste differences (198). Despite not directly figuring in the novel's main narrative, Sonagachi and the implications of the expectations from women are always in the background, especially around Phanibhushan. While Phani visits the place frequently, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra lives there, as his mother Trailokya Devi is an *Agraveli*, or a woman for whom prostitution is an occupational inheritance. Trailokya Devi belongs to Sonagachi and Chetna's *Kakima*,

or Phani's sister-in-law, is forced to go there to collect money for her husband's medical treatment. Towards the end of the novel, Phani kills his sister-in-law because he saw her at a brothel at Kalighat where "she shouldn't be seen" (398), despite his really proud admissions that the women at Sonagachi were unable to fulfill his appetite (50). Chetna's own struggle to come to terms with her position as a pawn between her father and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra may be contrasted with the treatment given to the other women in her life, which is useful to highlight how she occupies a liminal space in this economy of exchange. Chetna is linked to the other women in the novel by the pervasive role that violence and death play in her life. Although she does not have much agency in comparison to her father and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, she tries to acutely utilize her unique position to reject the economy of violence that other women in her family are forced to live with. Even before the prospect of becoming a hangwoman is presented to her, she has used her familial inheritance to her advantage every time she has been attacked, whether it is verbally, physically or psychologically. Physically, she uses her natural noose-making ability as a protective weapon against harassment on many occasions. Her strong physique and deft hands that can make a quick and fatal noose out of any piece of clothing make her stand apart from the helpless women in her family who are only the objects of violence. Additionally, her firm, unfaltering gaze and her ability to weave a story in any context during her televisual interviews threaten to reveal an oppressor in front of the whole country and her verbal restraint makes her a dangerous opponent in any debate. Psychologically, despite not opposing her father's towering presence in her life, she is able to generate favorable outcomes in any situation by pitting her father against Sanjeev. These attributes contribute to her transformation as an unselfconscious and confident woman who finally embodies the role of the hangwoman, casting aside all aspersions. Chetna counters violence through language and laughter. She realizes that laughter has an unfavorable association with women and hysteria and her laughter in any perplexing situation is far more efficient than an outburst. Her nonchalant attitude around her situation marks a significant departure from her earlier impassioned engagement. It may be said that despite the prison machinery comprising entirely of men, women are the real prisoners as they are unable to escape violence. Chetna is able to create a separate space for herself through a nuanced disengagement from all the influential people and factors around her. Her laughter also indicates a dispassionate attitude towards her life and an acceptance of her role as a hangwoman. Though she has been comfortable with death all her life and even has a seemingly stoic attitude towards her job, she has many internal dilemmas that she resolves right before the execution. She sees herself as a culmination point, an embodiment of all her predecessors. However, the act of pulling the lever is a significant event as she feels all the energy leaving her body then. Despite the fact that she 'executes' a flawless hanging without hurting Jatindranath at all, the action leaves her completely shocked and drained off, thereby requiring her to take definitive steps towards reducing the insidiousness of violence and death in her life. The next section of this essay describes the factors behind her multiple transformations, ending with her becoming a confident but self-conscious woman.

II

"He wrote, if three people each tell the same story to just three others, in eighteen operations, taking, say, eighteen hours, 38,74,20,489 people will have heard it... Unknowingly, Father, Thakuma and I propagated this formula of 'three raised to the power of eighteen'" (Meera, 329).

While they are agents of state, hangmen may be said to occupy the lowest rung of power in any society. Despite ensuring that dominant culture retains power through legal and punitive measures (Althusser, 1970; Foucault, 1977; Williams, 1977), the discourse around the identity-formation of executioners is peripheral to the dominant discourses. Unlike their necessity in monarchies, the histories of hangmen are of little value to the modern state. In the former, the figure of the hangman was seen as a personification of death itself; in the Hindu mythological context, for example, he might be seen as the embodiment of Yamaraj, the God of death. During legal executions, media narratives are focused around the severity of the crime, the rights of the criminal and the ethical issues around capital punishment. The executioner is seen as synonymous with the state, a mere agent, someone who 'executes' the orders of the state. In the modern state, state-sponsored executions may occur in the form of necropolitical control which affect certain sections of population rather than the individual, thus, the hangman has an even limited role in the manner in which dominant discourses are circulated. For a hangman, the only means of survival is through the circulation of alternative methods of storytelling. In Meera's novel, Phanibhushan is acutely aware of this. When an opportunity presents itself in the form of Jatindranath's sentence, he realizes that not only is there no able-bodied and worthy (male) successor in his family, but that this might be the last hanging he or anyone may execute in the country due to his old age and the dearth of capital punishment sentences over the years. Thus, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra's suggestion of Chetna being a worthy successor is important to her father for two reasons- the media interest around her gender would allow him to utilize his excellent storytelling skills to make the most of the opportunity economically and, it would allow him to narrate the 'legends' of his hangmen ancestors, thereby providing him a potential opportunity to propel his story into the popular imagination. Chetna's subsequent employment is therefore not intended to make her a true "symbol of strength and self-respect to the whole world" (71) but is a calculated decision taken by her father and Sanjeev to ensure posterity and economic gain, respectively.

Chetna has a dichotomous relationship with storytelling. The novel is narrated as an interior monologue that Chetna indulges in, in the form of stories meant to justify her actions to herself (and the reader) as well as to enable her identity formation that is singular and controlled by her. This mode of narration offers itself as a site where Chetna's transformation from an unsure but self-conscious woman to a confident but unselfconscious woman takes place. In the first phase, she is faced with a paradox that can only be resolved through storytelling. On one hand, she has to bear the weight of the illustrious stories of her ancestors on her shoulders despite them being reiterations of powerful masculinities characterized by virility, brute strength and machismo as recurring 'virtues'. She understands that she may have an edge over her adversary Sanjeev due to her inherited art of weaving legends about her ancestors and his need to sensationalize those stories for profit. Despite his best attempts to exploit her psychologically, monetarily and sexually, Chetna sees her ability to trace her lineage as an advantage over him who has no sensitivity towards the importance of individual histories. On the other hand, she is dissatisfied with the lack of narratives of bravado of female figures among her ancestors. Unlike a linear trajectory that can be traced from the first hangman of her family, Radharaman Grdhha Mullick to the last one, Phanibhushan Grdhha Mullick, narratives of notable women explore the ways in which their transgressive acts led to their banishment, death or destruction. While the various men (or grandfathers) are praised for possessing a distinct virtue which should be emulated and their experiences serve as lessons

on skill, tact and bravery, the narratives around women are largely pejorative, where the consequences of their transgressions are narrated as fates awaiting their female successors.

There are many moments of crisis in Chetna's transformation from an appointed hangwoman to the executioner who has carried out her first hanging. During these moments, she turns to her ancestors for guidance, but these are rarely her male precursors. She is reminded of the stories of transgressive women because they are in some ways intimately tied to her male ancestors. This leads her to trace a separate genealogy of these influential women. It is noteworthy that a 'feminist' genealogical reimagination is not premised upon caste-based occupation, religion or economic position. These women are united only by their refusal to fit into codes of gender and morality prescribed upon them by the prevalent power structures. Chetna's repeated evocations of these women indicates a desire to step out of the masculine and historicist lineage her family wants her to emulate but to which she would always remain an outsider. Instead, she wants to engender and participate in a process of identity-formation that includes precursors she chooses rather than those she inherits.

Pingakaleshini, the only other hangwoman in Chetna's family who lived in the thirteenth century, is remembered not because of her pioneering job but her unstifled laughter that led to the "fall of the land" (173). At six-months pregnant, Pingakaleshini was sold by her husband to King Tughral Tughan Khan as the latter was enamored by her laughter. He kept her as his concubine and violated her every night (174). She fashioned a noose from her umbilical cord and all her offspring with the king were dispatched off in this manner. She was then taken as a concubine by multiple kings and was finally helped by Balban with whom she struck a deal in exchange of the handover of Khan. She then hung him with her sari and let out her booming laugh after fifty years (176). Further, she asked to be appointed as a hangwoman and then hung a thousand people, according to Chetna's *thakuma*. Chetna thinks about Pingakaleshini whenever she wishes to avenge her molestation by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Ratnamalika, also born in the thirteenth century with a long scar-like birthmark from her face to the chin, could not bear that her mother was forced to commit sati, and had a fit of rage when her family attempted to get her married at the age of seven. Due to her scar and her fits of rage, she was demonized by the people around her, beaten by her family and tied to a pillar in order to bring her cursed prophecies under control. She was rescued by the emperor Bakhtyar Khilji and married to him (133). Chetna uses her example to refute Sanjeev's suggestion that inter-religious marriages threaten the stability of the society. Other examples include Elokeshi, a woman murdered by her husband in Chetna's grandfather's time for having illicit relations with a priest (244). While her husband is given a death sentence, public outrage leads his punishment to be commuted to life imprisonment. Chetna feels that death immortalized Elokeshi because living would have condemned her to a life limited to maternal duties like that of her own mother. She also mentions Khona, the cousin of Radharaman Mullick who was a poet and astrologer married to Mihira, the abandoned son of the royal 'jewel' Varaha in the court of King Vikramaditya (280). When she was invited by the king to be the tenth jewel in his court and her husband and father-in-law felt that it would be humiliating to be known in association with a woman, they tore out her tongue which led to her death (282). Chetna evokes Utpalavarna, who moved beyond the cycle of jealousy and desire to take a journey towards enlightenment (283); and Annapurna, the wife of her ancestor Saubhadra Mullick, who left her house to follow the Buddha's way "despite his exclusion of women from the path of enlightenment", and was vilified by the society for turning her back upon her maternal and wifely duties (268).

Goddess Manasa, widely worshipped in Bengal, exerts the most significant influence on Chetna. She is described as the “untouchable goddess of the dark-skinned and the poor inhabiting the backyard of Hinduism” due to her being an ‘illegitimate’ offspring of Lord Shiva and an idol (322). Since she is never accepted by Shiva and is loathed by Chandi, Manasa undergoes a transformation from being gentle and loving to *becoming* vengeful (325). Chetna embodies a similar transition through which she avenges the irreparable damage that Sanjeev Kumar Mitra has caused to her family due to his incessant meddling in her personal life. By enticing her family with a marriage proposal on one hand and exploiting their misery for sensational journalism on the other, Sanjeev’s presence in her life leads to familial discord, the death of her brother Ramu and the downfall of her father after he murders his brother Sudev and the latter’s wife in a fit of rage and misunderstanding. All these events are thoroughly milked by Sanjeev for television. At the end of the novel, Chetna tightens the noose around Sanjeev’s neck on his channel in an attempted recreation of her execution, pulls the rope tightly and leaves him flailing. She leaves the rope when he nearly chokes and with it, the channel’s set. She rejects the world of fame that replaced her own world, all of which could be tied to the vulturous media interference started by Sanjeev. Storytelling is central to the novel. While Phani attempts to cash in on his skill to make every situation profitable for himself, Sanjeev tries to spin inventive narratives for the TRPs of his channel and, more potently, decides which stories are worthy of coverage according to their monetary value. There is a terse battle between dominant narratives situated in the center that assume the responsibility of writing the histories and those people who are excluded from these histories. But, this does not portend any threats on Phanibhushan and his family because they are skilled in narrating stories. According to a pamphlet distributed by the political leader George Fernandes during the National Emergency in 1975, it takes eighteen hours for a story to reach the entire country’s population if it is recounted a sufficient number of times (Meera, 329). Thus, it may be argued that oral narratives proliferate faster and more efficiently than written documents and these narratives can be passed down from generation to generation as a subversion of official accounts. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, this is not a new practice; rather, it renders a mythical character to the tales with minor changes in each re-telling. It also has a radical subversive potential as it can be revised to be more inclusive towards those who have been excluded. While Phanibhushan uses oral narrativizing to propel the tales of his professional ancestry into the nationalist imagination through the opportune media attention he has received, Chetna revises those accounts to counter the masculinist imagination of her father by tracing a distinctly feminist lineage. Since every execution has a mechanical ritual associated with it, the narrative speculates about the ritual that Chetna would follow and the difference that her gender would bring to the act of execution. Not only does Chetna agree to hug Jatindranath at his request, which is unprecedented, but she also narrates a story to him just before his execution which provides him great relief. When Jatindranath makes a second request for a female-centric story, Chetna is about to narrate *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), a feminist utopian story written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, in which women run everything and men are secluded. However, the Inspector General commands her to proceed with the execution. This may also be seen as a complete inversion of *One Thousand and One Nights*, where the narrator is not allowed to proceed with another tale. Even though storytelling has the ultimate transformative power, Jatindranath is not *Scheherazade*- he is not the narrator- thus, he must die. This incident is thus both singular and doubly symbolic.

In this manner, Chetna transforms the act of hanging from being a site where various power dynamics play out in competition with each other to an act of dignity where there is no scope for power. She demonstrates that despite her limited but distinct role in carrying out the state's order, it is possible to subvert the entire punitive system through the radical act of storytelling. Through this act, she completes her personal transformation as well as lays the roadmap for an affective politics of interaction with the other which is far removed from violent displays of machismo. She leaves the mercenary world of sensational journalism which 'cultifies' people to return as a copy editor to the office of *Bhavishyath*—an old print media outlet within the novel that was associated with the communist revolution and movements against the Emergency. Her decision to depart from her original lived realities to seek a fresh start has been inspired by the need for revision and revolution in the current status-quo.

In conclusion, Meera's novel is a reimagination of discourses in the public sphere when even a single position of power occupied by a woman who is neither rich, nor privileged by class or caste can significantly alter them. While Chetna's position as a hangwoman completely transforms her life and the lives of those around her, whether in favorable or unfavorable terms, it cannot be denied that it leads to an awakening in her which makes her desirous of completely rejecting homosocial systems of patriarchal power and their violent impact on her. The novel's radical implications can be seen through Chetna's necessity to use violence as a means of self-defense, to her realization that she could put her limited agency to use by walking away from the imposed violence that has destabilized her world in the first place. Chetna's final act of choosing a pen over her familial inheritance completely ruptures masculinist imaginations of power and the state and introduces a different ethics of the representation of gender, nationhood and biopolitical ambitions of the state. This ethics is manifested by discarding the use of affects to create mass contagions, as done by capitalist media enterprises. Instead, she emanates an affective system based on sympathy, empathy, storytelling and laughter to transform interpersonal relationships around her.

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