

## Making of Nooses: Accentuating Vulnerability, Resilience, and Violence in K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman*

Pragya Dev<sup>1</sup>  
Binod Mishra<sup>2</sup>  
IIT Roorkee, India

### Abstract

Contemporary descriptions of female embodiment are rife with images of violence, domination, and subjugation. Often bracketed as vulnerable, women are constantly subjected to patriarchal and gendered violence. Vulnerability, however, is an ontological condition of humanity and can yield multifarious responses – abuse, love, disarray, violence, generosity, and contempt – making human life precarious. This precariousness, when situated in the Indian context, exposes humans to varied practices of violence enmeshed in vicious systems of caste, class, region, and religion as demonstrated in K. R. Meera's *Hangwoman* (2014). Owing to their centuries-old lineage of hangmen, Grddha Mullicks began making nooses right away in their mother's wombs. Chetna, the first hangwoman in her family, is staged as the successor to her familial duty to the Nation only because of her brother's tragic amputation of limbs. Subjected to a shrewd media lens and patriarchal manipulation, the struggle of constructing a new-feminist-styled 'angel of the house' depicted in the novel whirls poignant questions to corporeal vulnerability. This article scrutinises the societal treatment of vulnerability and explores physical, interpersonal, and epistemic violence haunting the book's pages. It further adds nuances to the engagement of media and identity while examining the precarity of the novel's characters.

### Keywords

Corporeal vulnerability, precarity and precariousness, patriarchal manipulation, resilience, epistemic violence

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<sup>1</sup> **Pragya Dev** is a Research Scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Roorkee, India. Her areas of interest include health humanities, gender studies, diaspora studies, and Indian literatures in English. Email: pragya\_d@hs.iitr.ac.in

<sup>2</sup> **Binod Mishra** is Professor of English at IIT Roorkee, India. He has authored several anthologies of poems and books. His areas of interest include Indian writing in English, folk literature, translation studies, world literatures, poetry, film and literature, graphic novels, professional communication, diasporic studies, and regional literatures in English. He has published in *ETropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, *Critique Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. Email: binod.mishra@hs.iitr.ac.in

## Introduction

Partha Chatterjee (1989) argues that the colonised were striving to outdo the West by overtaking their material advancements and fusing them with their Indian spiritual and cultural outlook without tampering with their 'true identity.' He asserts that Indian modernity was a prerogative of the 'nationalist project' – it did not succumb to the Western ways entirely – it manifested a dichotomy and thrived in the ambit of hierarchy. The divide between outside and inside was reckoned further through definitive social partakes. Sanjay Seth elucidates on the bearings of the naturalised social and gendered divide, stating that “the social position of women in these [colonised] countries was a sign of ‘backwardness.’ The notion that there was a ‘ladder’ of social development and that the position of women was a key indicator of what rung a society occupied on that ladder” (274). Modernity obliterated women politically as well as economically; it subsumed their identity and nailed it under the shadow of a patriarchal figure. In accordance with the stereotyped Indian social account, women are imbued with the expectations of nurturing family and practicing altruism. For Abraham, “the foremost identity of a [Indian] woman as wife and mother is fairly unified. It is one in which a woman is defined in relation to a man and her capacity to reproduce. Religions and cultural practices within India have condoned patriarchy and the belief that men are dominant/superior to women” (cited in Mehta 2-3).

In the pursuit of (re)inventing the new Indian women to match the pace of Western modernity, rationed education was imparted, which could only capacitate women to become good housewives, mothers, and caretakers. Women's education was envisaged as fashioning suitable spouses for men belonging to the incipient Westernised beau monde (Mazumdar 1972). Any dissonance in womanly characteristics would make her peculiar and against the norm, that is, man. Judith Kegan Gardiner (1981), building upon the existing research on the distinction between man and woman, talks about negotiated female identity:

Female gender identity is more stable than male gender identity. Female infantile identifications are less predictable than male ones. Female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men's. And the female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur more diffusely, at a different stage, or not at all. Cumulatively, we see a complex interplay between women's experiences of identity and men's paradigms for the human experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the area of self-concept is especially troubled for women. (361)

K. R. Meera meticulously unearthed the women “who had revolted inside and outside their homes, the women who had dreamed of new worlds, the women whose tresses continued to grow long and longer even when their skulls had crumbled to dust” (434) and carved the protagonist of her novel Chetna voicing those unnamed women forgotten by his-stories. Harboured in Kolkata, the novel orbits a young woman Chetna Grddha Mullick belonging to a family of executioners. She is subjected to the embedded power labyrinths: politics, bureaucracy, and sensationalised media when her father announces his retirement. Known for hanging four hundred fifty-one convicts, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick publicly demands the job of hangman, which was there in his family for centuries, for his daughter only because he had no immediate competent ‘man’ in his family to take over. The novel exhibits the power negotiations and social complexities of a family living in abject poverty. Foucault, in his 1984 interview, discusses the association of power with human freedom and argues that “there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free... if there are relations of power in every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere” (Bernauer et al. 12). Phanibhushan exercises his power-infested ‘freedom’ and names his daughter his successor without informing his kin. This inauguration of Chetna’s becoming summons the rendition of violence and vulnerability in the novel. Initially, she is manipulated as a puppet and made to put up with every instruction levied on her by the patriarchal forces around her, but gradually, she voices her agency.

As highlighted by Angela McRobbie (2020), “Femininity, as it is created in the imaginations of the cultural intermediaries of the consumer culture, as well as by various professionals and administrators of the state, is put to use as a mechanism for producing a whole world of ‘distinctions and society of inequality’” (McRobbie 1; Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 2006). This paper politicises vulnerability as an ontological condition of humanity and extends the conversation on the framing of women as a vulnerable subject, followed by their refashioning as the angels of the house for meeting the neoliberal motifs alone using Angela McRobbie’s *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* (2020). It promptly engages with human precarity and nuances the facets of violence. It further examines the crucial role of media and its intertwined associations with identity.

### **Woman and Vulnerability: A Framed Necessity**

The quotidian understanding of vulnerability is synonymous with victimhood, deprivation, dependency, or pathology. However, etymologically derived from the Latin word ‘vulnus’ (wound), vulnerability, for legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman, is “a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human

condition” (Fineman 8). Expanding on Carol Levine, Ruth Faden, Christine Grady, Dale Hammerschmidt, Lisa Eckenwiler, and Jeremy Sugarman’s question of falsely associating vulnerability with a particular group, Florencia Luna says,

When vulnerability is used as a fixed label on a particular subpopulation, it suggests a simplistic answer to a complicated problem. Research situations are often very complex and influenced by the context. To address the subject’s vulnerability, more than one answer may be needed. Different types of vulnerabilities can overlap, and this should be adequately considered. Furthermore, labelling fixes the content and after this is done, it cannot be changed easily. There is a lack of flexibility in this way of considering vulnerability. (124)

The syndication of a particular subpopulation, that is, women to vulnerability, is an upshot of the existing societal arrangements that deliberately privilege some and reason disadvantage for the other(ed) by refusing the allocation of resources and power. The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979) published by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Office for Human Research Protections [OHRP], 2022) projected the ‘vulnerable groups’ as mandating special considerations because of their proneness to exploitation and dependency. Consequently, it results in the bracketing of the ‘vulnerable group’ and subjects them to discriminatory models of identity-based politics. In *Hangwoman*, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, the 88-year-old hangman, takes the very first interview on behalf of his daughter Chetna after deciding her fate of becoming a hangwoman. “Before I [Chetna] could respond, Father began to speak” (Meera 39). Phanibhushan goes on to describe how great and skilled his forefathers and he were. Women, for him, were sanctum of lust, utility, and objectification. The air of insecurity and presumed vulnerability winds the house of Mullicks; when Chetna is summoned to the jail as the official hangwoman for Jatindranath Banerjee’s execution, her Kakima says, “Must go if she [Chetna] has to. But she isn’t going alone, is she?” (37)

Judith Butler has talked about the ethics of corporeal vulnerability, which is inherent to the human body. The ambiguous human precarity strengthens the self-other relationship by yielding responses vacillating between violence and care, abuse and generosity, and disdain and affection. For Butler, humans procure vulnerability through the actions of others and themselves, which incubates suffering and promotes precarity. “While emphasising that precariousness is an ontological condition of human life” (Mackenzie et al. 3), Butler also “stresses that we are not all affected by it to the same degree” (3). In *Hangwoman*, we find all the characters vulnerable. Phanibhushan is old and vulnerable; he would not have made Chetna his successor if he had been young enough to carry out the execution himself; Sanjeev Kumar Mitra is vulnerable as his past continues to

haunt him: he is the son of a prostitute who steals, exploits, and manipulates. Ramdev Grddha Mullick is vulnerable because his limbs were amputated by the person seeking revenge from his father; Bhuvaneshwari Devi (Chetna's Thakuma) is vulnerable because all she has is stories and a gold coin that is stolen and then bartered by her own son; Sachinamayi Devi (Chetna's mother) is vulnerable because she is prone to her husband's verbal and physical abuses as well as infidelity; Syamili Devi (Chetna's Kakima) is vulnerable when she pawns her body in order to afford her husband's treatments; Sudev Grddha Mullick (Chetna's kaku) is vulnerable because of his debilitating sickness. Ergo, Chetna or other female characters are not the only vulnerable; everybody is. As Martha Fineman (2008) iterates,

[V]ulnerability is—and should be understood to be—universal and constant, inherent in the human condition. The vulnerability approach I propose is an alternative to traditional equal protection analysis; it is a “post-identity” inquiry in that it is not focused only on discrimination against defined groups, but concerned with privilege and favor conferred on limited segments of the population by the state and broader society through their institutions. As such, vulnerability analysis concentrates on the structures our society has and will establish to manage our common vulnerabilities. This approach has the potential to move us beyond the stifling confines of current discrimination-based models toward a more substantive vision of equality. (Fineman 1)

The novel, however, thrives on the metaphor of nooses, which encapsulates Chetna's vulnerability: “the noose I'd [Chetna] tied even as a fetus was a faultless one” (Meera 3). She reflects on her swirling emotions through various situations by making varied-sized nooses. When she is nervous about becoming the first hangwoman, she makes a noose from the loose end of her dupatta.<sup>3</sup> When she sees Sanjeev Kumar Mitra through her window, she exclaims, “A noose of 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 with pleasure” (26). When she is disgusted for liking the thief and predator like Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, she “imagined making him stand on the hangman's plank, putting the death-hood on his face, placing the noose around his neck, and pulling hard in seven hundred and twenty-seven different ways” (27). When Maruti Prasad molested her at work, Chetna “tied a noose in the bat of an eyelid and, smiling at him [Maruti Prasad], put it around his neck like a marriage garland.... I [Chetna] had tightened the noose, passing the other end of the dupatta through the window bars and pulling it tight” (7-8). After almost killing Maruti Prasad, she says, “[A] tightened noose hung from my neck. I was afraid to look at my own

<sup>3</sup> A loose piece of material utilised for covering the abdomen or shoulders and is usually worn with tunic and trousers by women in South Asia.

hands. I had not realised that my hands were so strong, so rough” (9). She involuntarily makes nooses when the leader of the woman’s organisation comes and offers to fight the court case for Chetna, and her father asks for the money instead; she exclaims, “I suddenly noticed that I have made yet another noose with my dupatta. Small but perfect” (23). The varying size of Chetna's nooses exposes her inner rattling. As Florencia Luna (2009), while proposing vulnerability to be in layers and not labels, puts it:

[The] concept of vulnerability is a relational one. That is, it concerns the relation between the person or a group of persons and the circumstances or context. It is closely related to the situation under analysis. It is not a category or a label we can just put on... so, vulnerability should not be understood as a permanent and categorical condition, a label that is attached to someone given certain conditions (such as lack of power or incapability) that persists throughout its existence. It is not a black or white concept, that is, a fixed label that includes or excludes a particular group. (129)

*Hangwoman* (2014) affixes vulnerability as an imperative for all the characters in the novel that render humans precarious. By investigating the vulnerabilities, the novel forges a medium for rethinking the expansive affiliation between the individual and the collective, the social underpinnings and situations. The characters, on one hand, caress and combat their own vulnerabilities: Chetna initially dreads the thought of becoming a hangwoman. However, she navigates her vulnerabilities by fashioning nooses. Phanibhushan, failing to drink and smoke out through troubled times, impulsively gives in to his vulnerabilities and murders his own family members. Ramu da, Kakima, and Kaku, subsequently traversing through their vulnerable selves, succumb to the circumstances that ultimately render them dead. On the other hand, they also feast on each other’s vulnerabilities: Sanjeev Kumar Mitra cash in on Mullicks’ vulnerabilities for his professional and personal gain; Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick exploits his present situation as a piece of sensational news to sustain his family and lifestyle. Their intertwined vulnerabilities yield for and against them, evincing the precarity of human existence as prescribed and universal.

### **The Resilient ‘Angel of the House’**

Building upon the vulnerabilities in contemporary times, resilience, tailored to bolster neoliberal concerns, disseminates the banality of modern-day women empowerment that proliferates commercial ventures. Resilience thinking, with its apolitical bearings, has been disparaged for catering to, strengthening, and reproducing unwarranted social structures (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012; Joseph, 2013). In the words of Martha Fineman, “Resilience is not something we are born with. It is produced over time within social structures and under societal

conditions over which individuals may have little control” (24). While deciphering the mojo of contemporary neoliberalism, Angela McRobbie implores that the ongoing ‘new feminism’ assimilates and extends the tenets of liberal feminism and negotiates with ‘leadership-feminism’ to cater to social calibration. It disembarks a defined “range of values pertaining to the project of contemporary neoliberalism” (14). Comprehending the ongoing neoliberal refashioning of feminism as *p-i-r* (perfect-imperfect-resilience), she talks about how the mere presence of diverse racial groups in advertisements and events endorses the ‘perfect’ image and takes over the diverse audience. The ‘perfect’ image is then exposed to contradictions and givens; hence, the neoliberal agents pursue the ‘imperfect’ alongside. McRobbie states:

The perfect as a technology of the self therefore displays a capacity for reflexivity. The imperfect warrants further new forms of ‘care of the self’, while also being a space where feminism can be openly avowed; for example, in anger and frustration about harassment in the workplace and misogyny in the street, in fat shaming or in sexism in advertising. In this way the discourses of the imperfect legitimate, even more fully than does the perfect, the presence of feminism. They slide into place more seamlessly. Discourses proliferate saying that imperfections are to be expected, that they allow us to ‘embrace’ who we are. (49)

This sums up the conjured image of a perfect-imperfect-resilient woman who is simultaneously appreciated, accused, toasted, and maligned. The interweaving of two ideals – perfect and imperfect – fabricates today’s woman who can do/be/endure it all just because she can. K.R. Meera exposes her protagonist Chetna to a similar fabric that she is forced to clad initially in the novel. Chetna is undoubtedly capable of speaking for herself; she occasionally speaks but every word of hers has relevance, yet her father takes the interview on her behalf.

[Sanjeev Kumar Mitra] ‘So, Chetna, what do you think of your father, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick?’...

[Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick] ‘My father Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick...’ Father began to recite dramatically the words I [Chetna] was to speak. ‘I adore my father Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick. My father is my God.’

Father looked at me and smiled half mischievously, half in doubt.

‘Why, Chetu, isn’t it true?’

I [Chetna] had to smile, involuntarily, at that moment. (Meera 41-42)

The applicability of this resilience is the sense of inadequacy that is conjured on behalf of young women by the heteropatriarchy which “refers to the social, political, and economic system in which heterosexual men are the dominant

group in a society or culture” (Kelley and Arce-Trigatti 256). The concept consists of hetero, that is, the integral attraction to the opposite sex, and patriarchy, that is, the naturalised social ascendancy of men (Barker 2012). The term underscores the male dominance in a capitalist society. By focusing on the “interlocking systems of oppression” (Everett et al.), heteropatriarchy accentuates the relational nature of gender-based oppression. In the novel, Chetna is refashioned as ‘the angel of the house’ without her consent; a job is demanded, a deal and signing bonus amount are decided, and even her marriage is fixed on her behalf. The neoliberal-charged resilience summons the pro-family stance, and “[r]esilience techniques help women to step back from hard-edged leadership-feminism, thereby finding self-esteem as a woman without being pressured or ‘bullied’ by the perfect” (McRobbie 55). For McRobbie, “[T]he p-i-r plays an important role, by providing a vocabulary which addresses current issues that stem from women’s historic subjugation without aiming to dismantle or even profoundly disrupt the prevailing gender regime” (56). The novel demonstrates how subjugated women are celebrated and rewarded for being resilient:

Father did not ask me what I thought of it. He ordered me to sign. I signed. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra counted out a thousand and one rupees. When he handed over a thousand rupees to Father and one rupee to me, he deliberately brushed his fingers against mine. (Meera 53)

The dismissive behaviors of Chetna’s father and the handing of one rupee by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra explicate the refashioning of the angel of the house – her father’s ‘order’ guises as her ‘consent’ and ‘one rupee’ sustains her p-i-r bargain. Other women in the novel also cater to the stance of being resilient: “When we needed more money, Ma and Kakima sold tea the whole night through. But such occasions were rare” (Meera 7). K.R. Meera illustrates how women equally sanction the logic of substitution, feeding the flames of *p-i-r*: when Chetna calls sick and oversleeps because of the overwhelming public accusations, her mother asks her worriedly, “Don’t you have to go to the studio?... What if they don’t give us the money they agreed to if you don’t go? We need it to change the cracked asbestos” (108).

Another example of a *p-i-r* woman is Chetna’s Thakuma, who, when asked by Chetna about the troubles of women, says, “Oh well, what big trouble could women have? They stay inside the house and do little else but eat and sleep.... A trouble becomes a trouble only when you think of it that way. When I feel bad, I tell myself, I am Grddha Mullick’s daughter. We hangmen have been around since the earliest days of the world. Without the hangman, no power can survive” (110). The exigency of resilience rests upon the quotidian experiences



of perturbation, anxiety, and angst in times of uncertainty, accelerating a requirement of dependency on others. This need for resilience is then also transposed into a subconscious performative – with its relegated terms and conditions – as when the repressed is shamed for its dependence. These evocative vocabularies of resilience thus find their entryway to the everyday world, even if we are skeptical about the performance.

### Face(t)s of Violence in *Hangwoman*

Violence is born in the troubled waters of power. Virginia Held iterates, “Violence erupts especially when power is threatened or in danger of losing its hold. Violence is often an instrument of power, as when a government uses violence to suppress opposition” (Held 120). In the novel, Bhuvaneshwari Devi (Chetna’s Thakuma) constantly keeps reminding the family, “Time and again that the death penalty was not just the delivery of justice but also the imprint of power” (Meera 28). Hannah Arendt suggests that “Power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together. Wherever they are combined, power, we have found, is the primary and predominant factor” (Arendt 52). *Hangwoman* explicates several kinds of violence – interpersonal violence, collective violence, and epistemic violence. Interpersonal violence comprises violence among domestic partners, kin, or individuals where the intended group or cause is limited. In the novel, Chetna’s father Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, assaults his wife, Sachinamayi Devi, when she refuses to give her earnings from the tea stall to him. The saga of his assaults maims the novel. He rapes her in the middle of the market when she is young, and later, she becomes his wife. He physically assaults his brother when he steals from their mother. He later kills his brother’s wife, Syamili Devi, when he finds out that she was selling her body to pay the medical bills of her dying husband.

When Chetna is physically assaulted by Maruti Prasad at her workplace, she quits. When Sanjeev Kumar Mitra physically and verbally assaulted her, she still chose to keep quiet for the longest time. Ashapurna, Phanibhushan’s first love interest, becomes a prostitute because of her other lover, Satyapal Chakraborty. Nevertheless, she comes to collect Satyapal’s body for the last rites after his hanging. These conditioned, vulnerable, resilient women reinforce heteropatriarchy when they succumb to violence. This succumbing can be reasoned with the understanding of violence spurting from the writings of Hannah Arendt, articulated by Jacob Maze:

Certainly, violence would shape and influence the world, working to prevent certain manifestations in order to enable others, but it functions at the level of what already exists. In order for violence to be exercised at any nexus of power relations, they would have to be created first; for

example, in order for protestors to attack an authoritarian regime, that system of government needs to have been produced. For this reason, power is still perceived as “the primary and predominant factor” to violence. In this way, violence can only spawn from what has already been produced, though it frequently works to prevent certain phenomenon from entering the space of appearance, at least hegemonically speaking (134).

Chetna’s relegated stature in her relationship with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra facilitates her abysmal emotions when she recalls his whispering in her ears “I want to fuck you hard, even if only once” (Meera 27). She contrasts it with the physical harassment she suffers at the hands of Maruti Prasad:

The day Maruti Prasad had tried to grab me from behind... it was easy to ignore it as an act of violation; it was easy to overcome. But the insult from the words, with the body untouched – that burned. But I was not clear what had wounded me more. Was it the words ‘only once’ or ‘fuck’? Was it the way he uttered them? (31)

Arendt suggests that acts of violence preserve and restore power. When the convict Amartya’s father severs Ramdev Grddha Mullick’s limbs, he seeks violence because he is incapacitated to save his own son from hanging.

The novel looks further into collective violence, which refers to the “instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group... against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives” (Krug et al. 1084). The profession of Grddha Mullicks’ is afflicted with violence. In the interview that follows in the text, Chetna and her father, Phanibhushan, constantly reflect on their job as agents of government, fulfilling the duty levied upon them. In one of the initial interviews, Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick exclaims,

It is important to sustain law and justice in this world. There can be no nation if law and justice do not prevail. No government. None of us will exist. The hangman is the last link in the chain of duty performed by the police and the army. The hangman is not a hired killer. He is responsible officer of the government...he takes away a person’s life for the sake of the nation. He delivers justice. (Meera 42)

The family of Grddha Mullicks executed the people declared guilty convicts by the institutions imparting justice for centuries. However, they battle to keep their jobs and having a steady income. In the words of Chetna, “[W]e writhed and flailed without breath, all our lives” (19). The job of hanging people denies the Mullick family emotional and linguistic reciprocation from the common masses. Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick tries to stage his lineage infused with pride and heroism. However, he is relegated and subjected to epistemic violence when he is called Vulture Mullick by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. “The notion

of epistemic violence denotes the different ways in which violence is exercised in relation to the production, circulation, and recognition of knowledge: the denial of epistemic agency for certain subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification, among many others” (Pérez 81). Despite the vicissitude of the hangman lineage suffered greatly post-independence, throughout the novel, the narrative thrives on what Foucault (1980) calls “subjugated knowledges” which proliferate the grandeur of being a hangman. Thakuma repeatedly recounted the stories from the past: how her family lineage began during the rule of the Nanda dynasty. The first hangman of the family was Radharaman Mullick, initially a doctor by profession. He volunteered to hang the prince whom he had healed in return for marrying his lover, Chinmayi Devi. Because of his precise positioning of the noose “between the third and fourth vertebrae” (Meera 12), he was assigned the lifelong job of a hangman. Thakuma’s ancestors were the harbingers of justice: her account of eight-century hangman Bhishma Grddha Mullick proclaims how he could foresee death even when the first Pala king, Go Pala, could not.

Despite being warned by Bhishma, the Pala king declared a death sentence for a Hindu sannyasi who spoke against the Buddhist faith. A change of fate occurred, and he was not hanged until the final day of death was predicted by Bhishma. While disseminating the stories of her lineage with pride, she channels “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (Foucault 21). However, K.R. Meera summons the curtailment of their status quo through her protagonist Chetna when she describes her house: “Our home was dilapidated enough to look ancient too, as though it might tumble down any moment. It was one of the oldest buildings on Strand Road. We were living in the cowshed of the house that her [Thakuma] great-grandfather built... All the rooms opened into the small courtyard where only one person could stand. The tea shop, the salon, and the kitchen had wooden false ceilings” (Meera 13-14).

### **Media and its Mediation of Identity**

The novel’s exposition resists the naturalised social order by summoning the subjective stance of its protagonist, Chetna Grddha Mullick, and thrives on the wretched terrains of power which regulate identity. Resonating with Lacanian thought, which situates language as the primary locus of subjectivity, the first-person narration in the novel summons the ‘self’ of the protagonist as a ‘social process’ rather than a fixed entity residing within individuals. As Erving Goffman argues, the prerequisite of every efficacious social interaction is the projection of a public identity that can orchestrate others’ behaviours (Goffman, 1959, 1963;

Leary, 2001; Tselon, 1992). Miranda Fricker (2007) asserts that participants in any social frame are situated not in abstraction but always in the nexus of power in conjunction with each other. *Hangwoman* begins with Chetna's dissemination as the first hangwoman in the country by cannibalistic media. It continues to manipulate and mediate her identity as a deviant body. Her face, opinions, and family legacy in the form of sensationalised stories are bartered for TRP by the media person Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. As David L. Altheide (1997) iterates, "The mass media in general, and especially the electronic news media, are part of a 'problem-generating machine' geared to entertainment voyeurism, and the quick fix" (Altheide 647). Resembling Foucault's argument regarding the construction of the body in the image of its anatomy and pathology, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra in *Hangwoman* tries to construct a marketable image of Chetna Grddha Mullick which he could exclusively trade for making a fortune for himself and his media house. He uses the bait of marriage to cloud Mullicks' judgments and lures them as per his profit-seeking whims. The predatory nature of news media subsumes the legacy of Grddha Mullicks for meeting its profitable numbers, and Chetna's emancipation is a mere offshoot of the propaganda. On his first visit to their house, he tries to click Ramdev's picture to spin the emotional segment on his channel, but Chetna breaks his camera instead. After the stay on hanging of Jatindranath, Chetna calls Sanjeev on the command of her father to cover Ramdev's critical condition in exchange for money required for Ramdev's treatment; he rebukes her instantly,

Look madam, I know what's worth seeing and what's not. If I tell you to pull off the sheet, you better do it! ...Remember? That day when I tried to take a picture of him, you knocked down my camera? Now, you yourself have summoned me here to take pictures of him! (Meera 248-249)

K. R. Meera provides a striking contrast to the paid and sensationalised media with veteran journalist Manavendra Bose's Bhavishyath. When offered sellable news by Phanibhushan Grddha Mullick, he exclaims, "But our generation simply can't stomach the idea of buying news" (93). The concluding pages of the novel depict the literal and metaphorical hanging of the paid media where Chetna, when asked to demonstrate the hanging on live television for sheer TRP purposes, hangs Sanjeev Kumar Mitra. Her walking away asserts her identity by resisting her tyrant sham lover, and her walking towards Bhavishyath, where she takes up the job of a proofreader shortly after her brother's death, resonates with her resolute questioning of power structures. The character of Chetna, in the end, embodies the "ways in which women resist the dominant male order by

subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and deploying them for their own interests and agendas” (Mahmood 205).

### **Conclusion**

Vulnerability, as discussed above, is iterated regardless of gender, class, caste, and power position. With its meaning resting in the realms of wounds and suffering, it encapsulates not just women but humans since vulnerability is an ontological condition of human embodiment. Adding to the naturalised biases, the International Bioethics Committee report sanctioned by UNESCO associated women with ‘special vulnerabilities’, levying women with despicable adjectives like frail and vulnerable. Margaret Urban Walker’s (2008) contention that society designates vulnerabilities while assigning responsibilities makes it a two-way process: one is vulnerable because they are responsible and vice versa. The text expands on human precarity and kiln vulnerabilities of its versatile gamut of characters comprising men and women. It allocates agency from tyrant patriarchal tutelage to women with perfect nooses and grips on the manhandled lever of society.

Through the assessment of *Hangwoman*, this article elucidates the stance of recalcitrant women in heteropatriarchal society. Chetna’s narrative subverts the world of stinking patriarchy regulating and foreshadowing the identities of women. Her journey of becoming a hangwoman manifolds the (un)said realities and comments on the pruned feminism as a handmaiden of capitalism. It reflects on how the refashioning of the ‘angel of the house’ has jostled further in deteriorating the condition of women. The paper further exposed the multifarious violence(s) reverberating the thrust of power in the novel. By foregrounding the identity of Chetna amidst a shrewd media lens, it explained the societal ambush feeding the flames of capitalistic ways of living – from manufacturing news to sensationalising it.

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