

Rope of Resistance: Subaltern Identity through Myth and History in *Hangwoman* by K. R. Meera

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how myth and ancestral history work as a power structure to contribute a major part in framing a person. It is one of the most important works among the contemporary Indian novels which was originally written in Malayalam as Aarachar (2012) and translated by J. Devika. The novel is set in Kolkata. Even though it was set in the contemporary Indian social background it traces a 2,400 years old genealogy to engage with the myth and history in a conscious, prolonged interaction to create a multi-layered subaltern identity of its main character, Chetna Grddha Mullick. This paper employs the theorisation of the subaltern by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, subaltern historiography by Ranajit Guha and lieux de mémoire by Pierre Nora to argue that Meera invokes the blurring of mythological and historical time as a narrative strategy to chart a subaltern form of subalternity that is neither entirely victimised nor entirely resistant but exists in the generative, unstable zone. The article also argues that this peripheral location makes possible a feminist counter-archive which puts into question the colonial and patriarchal histories of writing, reclaiming the voices of women forgotten by official national memory.

KEYWORDS

feminist counter-archive, history, myth, postcolonial theory, subaltern identity

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1. Introduction

K. R. Meera (2014) *Hangwoman* is a powerful representation of the internal as well as external conflicts faced by a subaltern woman to retain her self-respect and identity. The novel is a remarkable narrative achievement that sustains emotional tension and psychological intensity throughout the narrative. Meera carefully constructs the protagonist's psychological and social struggles of the protagonist of the novel as she represents a realistic victim of patriarchal oppression who bravely and intelligently fights against the diplomatic manoeuvres of the patriarchal politics of the older as well as the younger generation. Through Chetna Grddha Mullick, the novel attempts to address the necropolitics of patriarchy and media sensationalism.

The story of Chetna Grddha Mullick, the twenty-two-year-old who was commissioned as the first female executioner in India, is not merely a tale of female strength. Through her, the author points to the methodical questions about the pain, suffering, remembrance and silence of the subalterns, which they have been carrying through centuries. The Grddha Mullick family has served as the official executioner family of the state since the Nanda dynasty, but they never received social recognition or historical visibility, and not even a single page was dedicated for them in the annals of the nation's history. They are always part of the power structure, yet they are never permitted to exercise or experience that power. They exemplify the supreme power of the state by holding the right to kill, but they are not a part of the power structures of the society. For them, power remains symbolic rather than materially accessible.

The particular paradox makes *Hangwoman* a better resource for exploring subaltern identities. The novel is not just a subaltern experience as in sociological realism; rather, it shapes subalternity through a sustained, purposeful blurring of myth and history. The chapters interweave the historical record of Bengal, the oral lore of the family tradition, mythology and the unfolding awakening of Chetna. The outcome is a narrative architecture where the distinction between the written and the oral narrative takes the form of the ground on which identity is constructed.

This paper examines the role of myth and historical reconstruction. It analyses how mythologizing and historization serves as a framework for subaltern identity formation in *Hangwoman*. Based on the concept of Spivak's (1988) essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* the paper tries to prove that the author, through her strong narrative reasoning, takes firm steps to transform the ambiguity between myth and history into a form of epistemological resistance. It is a kind of resilience and resistance that enables the subaltern characters in the novel, and especially the women characters, to know themselves and be remembered in their own way.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the postcolonial and memory studies frameworks. It focuses on the concept of subalternity introduced by Spivak. She states, "it is the structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed" (Spivak, 1988, p. 8). The subaltern is not voiceless but structurally unheard within dominant discourses. Spivak's analysis emphasize the distinction between representation and re-presentation. In addition, it underscores how marginalised voices are often mediated or distorted. The historiographical perspective of Ranajit Guha helps structure the study's analysis of how colonial and nationalist archives systematically erase subaltern agency.

Additionally, Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) provides a framework to understand how memory persists through material and symbolic forms when official histories fail to preserve it. These frameworks enable an analysis of how myth and history interact to

produce alternative epistemologies of identity.

3. Literature Review

Meera's *Hangwoman* has attracted significant scholarly attention for its exploration of gender, power, memory, and institutional violence. Existing studies primarily examine the novel through feminist and socio-political perspectives. Mohanta and Banerjee (2024) analyze the multilayered structures of patriarchy represented in the narrative and argue that the protagonist's identity is shaped through oppressive gendered power relations. Similarly, Shirin and Aiswarya (2025) interpret the novel as a narrative of resistance and liberation in which the female subject negotiates autonomy within restrictive social frameworks. Another important area of scholarship focuses on biopolitics and institutional control. Pandey (2020) reads the novel as a critique of biopolitical power where the female body becomes a site of state surveillance, punishment, and public spectacle. This interpretation reflects how systems of authority regulate identity and silence marginalized voices. Such concerns correspond with Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern remains structurally unheard within dominant discourses despite attempts at representation.

Recent studies have also emphasized memory and historiography in the novel. Vinayan and Raj (2024) examine *Hangwoman* as a feminist fiction of memory that reconstructs suppressed histories through personal and collective remembrance. Likewise, Pandey and Rai (2024) explore the blending of myth and history and argue that Meera destabilizes historical certainty through the integration of folklore, ancestral memory, and political violence. These studies indicate that myth and memory function as alternative modes of historical reconstruction that challenge official narratives. Theoretical contributions by Nora (1989) and Guha (1982) further strengthen the interpretative understanding of the text. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* explains how memory survives through symbolic and cultural forms when official histories fail to preserve lived experiences. Similarly, Guha's subaltern historiography highlights how dominant historical narratives often erase marginalized agency and voices.

Although substantial scholarship exists on *Hangwoman*, much of the criticism remains limited to isolated discussions of feminism, patriarchy, or biopolitical violence. Relatively less attention has been given to the interconnected relationship between subalternity, memory, historiography, and mythic reconstruction within a unified framework. Therefore, this study attempts to address this gap by examining how Meera employs myth and history as narrative strategies to construct subaltern identity and resistance against dominant power structures.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach based on post-colonial and memory studies.

The narrative is closely analysed through close reading with special focus on narrative structure, characterisation, and thematic patterns. The study applies the theoretical concepts derived from Spivak, Guha, and Nora to interpret how myth and history function as narrative strategies. This interpretive methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of how subaltern identity is constructed and represented through myth and history.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. The Concept of Subaltern and the Problem of the Archive

Spivak adapts Gramsci's concept of the subaltern to describe socially marginalized groups excluded from structures of power and institutional representation on the basis of class, caste, race, coloniality, and gender. According to Spivak, the subaltern is not literally voiceless; rather, their speech remains unheard or unrecognized within dominant hegemonic discourses. Her distinction between political representation and cultural representation is particularly significant, as it reveals how marginalized subjects are often spoken about or represented by others without being allowed to articulate their own experiences. As Spivak argues, "the subaltern may be spoken about, even spoken for, without ever being heard on their own terms" (1988, pp. 70–71).

The Grddha Mullick family faces multiple forms of marginalization in the novel. The professional status of the family as hereditary executioners places them outside conventional caste structures but they lack an identified location in any recognised caste group. They are useful to the state yet not accepted by the state in terms of society. The novel also portrays gender discrimination. Being women within a patriarchal structure, they are unable to express their opinions, and their lives are completely under the instructions of the male. Chetna experiences the same as being part of the system. She is pushed down the hierarchy where, as Spivak puts it, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 83).

The subaltern historiography put forward by Guha presents a parallel frame. Guha (1982) in his original book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) maintains that colonial and nationalist records deny agency to subaltern groups, and they treat subaltern groups only as objects for their administrative interest, not as pillars or constructors of history. *Hangwoman* is a fictional performance of such a historiographical criticism. The Mullicks are figured as "eye witnesses to the momentous events that have shaped the history of the subcontinent" (Meera, 2014, p. 1), and none of the history books document their existence.

The third theoretical pillar is the idea of "lieux de mémoire" ("sites of memory") (Nora, 30) by Pierre Nora. Nora states, "a site of memory is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in its nature, which by action of human will or the work of time has become a representational or symbolic element of the memory or memorial heritage (inheritance) of any community. It may refer to any place,

object or concept vested with historical significance in the popular collective memory. The rope of the family, the gallows in the Alipore Jail, the Nimtala Ghat, the oral narratives themselves all function as such sites in *Hangwoman*. These symbols signify the storage of a history which has been omitted in the official memory and is only held on in material and narrative terms.

5.2. Myth as a Counter Archive

In *Hangwoman*, the chapter divisions are carefully structured to trace Chetna's psychological and social transformation through the interconnected narratives of myth and history. Meera repeatedly presents execution not merely as a legal punishment, but as a cultural and mythic institution rooted in hereditary memory. Through hyperbolic storytelling and ancestral recollections, both Thakuma and Phanibhushan Mullick elevate their family history into legend. Their narratives reconstruct the executioner lineage as a source of authority, transforming personal history into a grand narrative that legitimizes their inherited profession and social identity.

Mythologization in the novel functions as a strategy of resistance against the marginalization traditionally imposed upon subaltern communities. Throughout the narrative, Chetna repeatedly turns toward ancestral myths and family history to negotiate her own identity and emotional strength. While describing her encounter with Maruti Prasad, she states: "I turned around calmly and gazed into his eyes. I was fearful or nervous. Instead, laughter bubbled up in me... Like all the other Grddha Mullicks, I too am unusually tall and have a strong, well-built frame..." (Meera, 2014, p. 8). Her confidence emerges directly from her identification with hereditary memory and collective lineage. Similarly, the symbolic significance of execution is reinforced through the statement: "The hangman's rope is not meant to tie the cow. To kill the cock, you don't need a hangman" (Meera, 2014). The noose becomes more than an occupational tool; it functions as a metaphor for inherited authority, survival, and resistance.

Meera therefore employs myth not as decorative folklore, but as a counter-archive that challenges dominant historical and social narratives. Oral narratives function as counter-memory structures that preserve marginalized identities beyond official archives, similar to the role of folklore in identity preservation discussed by Pukhrabam and Devi (2025). The oral traditions inherited by Chetna are largely feminine, transgressive, and memory-oriented. Thakuma's stories repeatedly glorify the power associated with the executioner's lineage and connect it with cultural and religious symbolism, particularly the figure of Ma Kali. These narratives reshape women who resisted patriarchal norms into figures of courage and resistance, thereby strengthening Chetna's evolving consciousness.

The anti-archival function of myth is most evident in the character of Thakuma, who serves as the principal mythographer of the novel. Her authority emerges not from literacy or institutional power, but from memory and oral transmission. In this sense, she embodies what Nora (1989) describes as *milieux de mémoire*, or living environments of memory sustained through continuous cultural

transmission. Her narratives are not static remnants of the past; rather, they actively shape Chetna's understanding of identity, resistance, and historical continuity.

Conversely, Phanibhushan Mullick represents a more politicized use of myth and memory. Unlike Thakuma, who preserves ancestral narratives as cultural inheritance, Phanibhushan strategically manipulates family history for public recognition and economic survival. Through his interactions with the media, he transforms selective memory into spectacle and ideology. Observing him closely, Chetna gradually learns the politics of narration, representation, and performance. The tension between Thakuma's memory-centered storytelling and Phanibhushan's performative mythmaking enables Chetna to critically negotiate her own identity within competing structures of history, media, and power.

5.3. The Re-imagination of History: From the Colonial to the Postcolonial

When myth is transformed into a counter-archive, the history in *Hangwoman* becomes a necessary mode of recovering marginalized experiences. The novel is dotted with factual allusions of history. It portrays the partition of Bengal, independence struggles, the Naxalite insurgency and the capital punishment debate in postcolonial India. As hereditary executioners, the Mullicks function as witnesses and instruments of history, but never as its acknowledged participants. They hang freedom fighters, criminals and those who condemned the colonial states. They are the implementers of verdicts in history without being consulted on the fairness of the verdicts.

This stance enables Meera to launch a long-term critique of what Spivak identifies as epistemic violence, the violence of erasing, distorting, or pre-structuring the subjectivity of the marginalised. The Mullicks are treated merely as a functional category (executioner), rather than persons. This constitution is passed on to the postcolonial state. Upon being chosen to be the hangwoman, the media apparatus is not a reflection of her subjectivity; as a "poster child" for competing ideological projects: feminist progressivism on one side, conservative patriarchy on the other without ever asking what she herself desires or understands (Meera, 2014, p. 215).

The novel is also sensitive to another irony. Even the feminist movement that champions Chetna acts as a producer of the epistemological structure that it purports to challenge. Chetna's appointment is presented as an opportunity to celebrate women's empowerment, yet the symbolic application of the idea demands an extraction of her character. It extracts her from the concrete, debased and stigmatised social life that she is living. Her determination gradually transforms her into a symbolic public figure. Her appointment as the first hangwoman helps her to break the barriers of subaltern constraints which were entangling her plight. She easily breaks the barriers of the constraints for a Dalit woman to achieve the heights of a public figure. In the narrative, Meera's narrative closely reflects Spivak's concerns regarding subaltern representation and epistemic marginalization. In her work, instead of giving voice to the subalterns, she made the subalterns validated from their own cultural and traditional myths to frame their voice to speak for their rights and honours. The words of Thakuma are

the real motivation for all subaltern communities. As her voice speaks for them, “No work is low. No work makes you a sinner. Then, as far as performing this task is concerned ...” (Meera, 2014, p. 12). It shows that the author intentionally traces the roots of tradition to fight against the varna system in India.

The author vividly chooses the settings to execute the narratological restructuring from the grand narratives to the counter-narrative construction. Throughout the novel she tries to retain the historical grandeur of Kolkata as a symbol of memory. She keeps the texture of Kolkata as a parallel argument. Instead of showcasing the luxurious and monumental aspects of the city, she focuses on the reminiscences of the majestic history to establish that the power structures will never be permanent. Nimtala Ghat, the cremation ground on the Ganga; the dead bodies; and the processions remain as the symbolic sites of memory. As stated by Nora, society preserves memory through these sites. Ghat, the great cremation field on the Ganga, “where death is perpetually present” (Meera, 2014, p. 34) is much of the setting of the novel. The city is not an indifferent setting; in the words of Nora, it is *lieux de mémoire* of extreme density - a place where the colonial past, the partition trauma of Bengal, its revolutionary past, its caste hierarchies and its poverty are all present at the same location spatially. Reading *Hangwoman* is to navigate a city that bears its history on its skin, just as Chetna bears hers.

In *Hangwoman* the hangman’s rope acts as an excellent symbol as well as a living archive of the subaltern history. In the hangman family the rope is the real site of memory which transmits the tales of the criminals. By reminding us of the stories of the deaths of the unwanted, it preserves the counter-narratives.

5.4. The Blurred Boundary as a Site of Subaltern

The most theoretically significant aspect of *Hangwoman* lies not in the opposition between myth and history, but in their deliberate fusion. Meera refuses to maintain a stable distinction between mythological time and historical time. Mythic imagery, ancestral memory, and supernatural suggestions frequently permeate the historical narrative, while references to verifiable political and colonial histories are woven into stories associated with the Mullick lineage. This narrative blending is not merely a stylistic device or an element of magical realism; rather, it functions as a conscious epistemological strategy.

For marginalized communities excluded from official historical discourse, the boundary between documented history and remembered experience remains politically charged. Official history itself becomes an instrument of power that determines what qualifies as truth, whose experiences deserve historical recognition, and which forms of memory are considered legitimate. Meera challenges this hierarchy by granting equal narrative authority to oral memory and documented history. The stories transmitted through generations of the Mullick women are positioned alongside colonial and political histories without subordinating one to the other. In doing so, the novel destabilizes dominant historiography and foregrounds alternative modes of remembering and narrating the past.

It is within this liminal space between myth and history, documentation and oral transmission, that Chetna's subaltern identity emerges most powerfully. She exists in a condition of profound contradiction: entrusted with carrying out the ultimate authority of the state while remaining socially marginalized; celebrated symbolically as a feminist figure while continuing to experience structural subordination; and inheriting a centuries-old executioner lineage while living within material insecurity and emotional isolation. Her identity is therefore shaped through overlapping structures of power, memory, gender, and historical inheritance.

Subaltern agency in the novel emerges not through heroic rebellion, but through storytelling itself. As the narrative progresses, Chetna increasingly turns toward ancestral narratives not merely for emotional refuge, but as a framework for understanding her own condition beyond the language offered by the state, media, or institutional feminism. Storytelling in *Hangwoman* becomes a transformative act through which identity and agency are reconstructed, reinforcing the narrative-centered understanding of subjectivity discussed by Devi and Bansal (2025). The act of recounting the family's counter-history becomes an attempt to make subaltern experience visible and historically intelligible. In this sense, the novel reflects Spivak's argument regarding the difficulty of rendering subaltern speech audible within hegemonic systems of representation.

The conclusion of the novel intentionally preserves this ambiguity. After carrying out her first execution, Chetna withdraws from public visibility and accepts work as a copy editor at a small newspaper. This ending does not suggest liberation in any conventional sense; rather, it marks a movement away from spectacle and toward control over representation itself. Significantly, the copy editor does not speak publicly but shapes what becomes speakable. Meera thus presents a restrained yet powerful commentary on the limitations imposed upon subaltern speech within dominant structures of power. At the same time, the novel suggests that resistance may survive quietly at the margins through acts of narration, reinterpretation, and the persistent negotiation of representational boundaries.

Conclusion

Hangwoman critically reflects on what it is to be both a tool of state power and its most marginalised object. By maintaining the persistent intermingling of myth and history, Meera creates a subaltern identity of unique complexity in Chetna Grddha Mullick. Meera portrays this blurring and their mutual integration, their refusal to be sorted into a neat order of precedence to represent the same. This identity is neither fixed nor stable. It negotiates caste marginality, gender subordination and the spectacularised visibility of the media age, and the myth-history axis sheds light on each of these aspects in different ways.

Therefore, the novel argues through this formal strategy that subaltern identity cannot be comprehensively interpreted through either historical or mythological frameworks alone. It demands a

reading mode that is multitemporal, that treats oral tradition with the same seriousness as does archival evidence, and that is mindful of how the very act of narration is a politics of claim-making. The rope through which the state exercises its authority turns in the hands of Chetna into the strand which ties together the women who have been silenced by history in 2,400 years of Bengali history. To spin that thread, like Meera does so with such remarkable attention, is in itself a kind of counter-historiography and an important contribution to contemporary Indian subaltern discourse.

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Declaration

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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