

Reading Indian Woman Through the Writings of K. R. Meera
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K. R. Meera

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K. R. Meera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K._R._Meera)

Abstract

“If women’s bodies and those of men and women who transgress their gender roles have been historically regarded as territories to be conquered, they are also territories to be liberated. Feminism has taught us this. The nationalism that I seek is one that decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth.” - Cherrie Moraga (150)

Post-colonialism and Feminism are both movements that concern themselves with the study and defence of the marginalised and have followed a similar theoretical trajectory. “Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender, culture, race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/ colonial authority constructs itself” (Gandhi 1998). Postcolonial feminist theory, like any other postcolonial discourse, begins with a gendered critical viewpoint of colonialism, particularly within a framework of power and knowledge, developed by Foucault. But what makes the movement different is a critical examination of the aftermath of colonialism, particularly in the light of “double colonialism.”.

Possible Differences between Two Women

Excerpting from Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*, the exchange between two-woman characters goes like this:
"Mama-Sal: We were content for a while-
Savannah: Sort of. Until the revolutionaries told the women, put down your guns and pick up the babies... And into the kitchen."

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

This happens to be a perfect example for how women in postcolonial nations, get reduced to the sites for cultural/ biological reproduction alone. All regional and national struggles for freedom are known for powerful female presences as well. But when the struggles are done, spaces are nothing but domestic for the women. "Postcolonial feminist theory's project can be described as one of interrupting the discourses of postcolonial theory and of liberal western feminism, while simultaneously refusing the singular third world woman as the object of study", says Rosemary Marangoly George (George, 2016). It is thus a complex discourse by which the writers of postcolonial nations "write back", creating a niche of their own.

Focus of This Paper

My paper deals with the works of Malayalam author K. R. Meera, particularly her works of short fiction, and how she excels in portraying the third world woman protagonist of Kerala, draped in all her myriad colours. She explores the postcolonial woman's condition in its raw, naked forms, comprising all the major postcolonial feminist themes. The woman of her narratives is often unabashed and strong, refusing to abide by societal norms. One observes the presence of almost all relevant postcolonial feminist themes in the works of K. R. Meera, including the "re- working of old identities and identity markers and erosion of stereotypes and myths, questioning the role of family in controlling women, the possibilities of egalitarian society, and the use of religious doctrine in oppressing women" (Nayar, 2008).

Gender Themes

Gender themes in postcolonial writing include identity (sexual, ethnic, national, socio-political, cultural), marriage, sexuality, desire and the body, subalterns, role of 'mothers'-motherhood and motherland, women and spirituality in postcolonial societies, women and nation, etc.

Women and Nation & Identity

"The nation and gender are interlinked social phenomena. Women are involved in, or rather relegated the responsibility for the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation." (Yuval-devis 2002). Gender has been intrinsic to national imagining, says Elleke Boehmer (Boehmer, 2005) Most national movements have men in active roles, women being side lined to minor roles. Very often, nations and kingdoms engage in struggles for freedom, honour and wealth accumulation, but it is interesting to see the roles consigned to women in the same. In many instances, women are given accolades for their timely deaths, protection of honour, etc. There are resemblances between how the man lusts for and colonises land, and how he conquers and colonizes the woman. Woman is rather objectified as a piece of wealth and honour that has to be colonized.

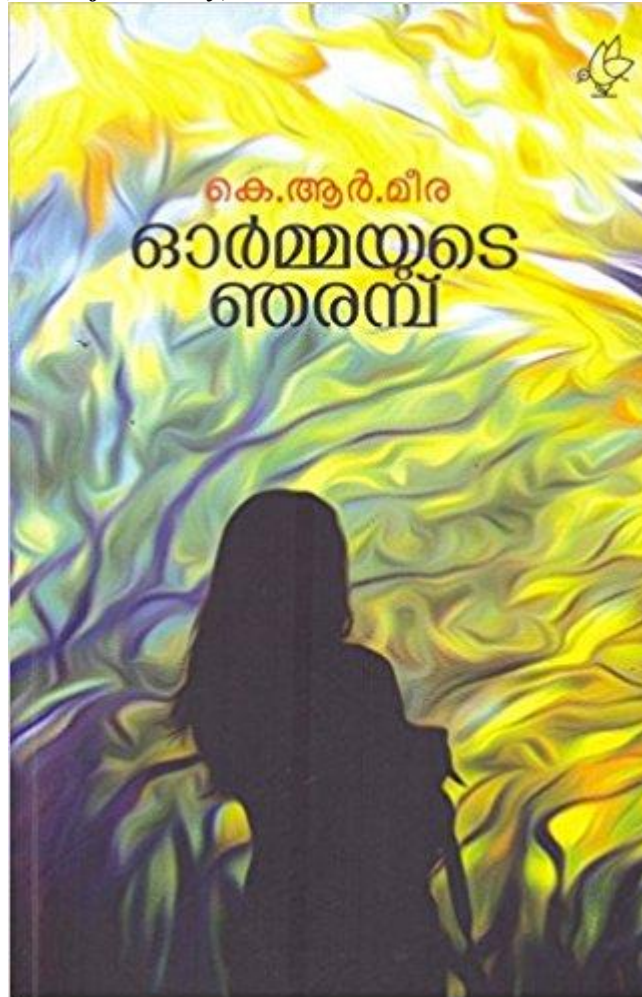
George Mosse opines that nationalism evolved parallel to modern masculinity. Terms such as 'honour', 'patriotism' and duty' are masculinized (Nagel, 2003).

Kumari Jayawardane argues that third world women share three features with the anti-colonial struggles- the desire for internal social reforms, the destruction of religious orthodoxies and pre-capitalist structures that prevent reform, and the assertion of a national identity. (Nayar, 2008)

Post-Independence

After independence, women in India were pushed to the domestic realms. 'Mother India', is a coinage of independent India, and that is something that imagines woman in terms of symbols like birth, hearth, home, roots etc. In mythology as well, woman is the supreme protector and nourisher.

Ormayude Njarambu (Vein of Memory)



K.R. Meera has penned the short story *Ormayude Njarambu (Vein of Memory)* that recounts the story of an aged woman who was a freedom fighter and writer. She marries a fellow nationalist who grows up to be a politician in independent India. She is pushed to the domestic

space, forced to take care of home and children. She nurses a dream of visiting Delhi, where her husband is, a dream she cannot fulfil. (Meera, 2016)

Most women postcolonial writers see cultural identity as evolving rather than fixed, plural rather than singular, adapted rather than inherited. (Nayar, 2008). Postcolonial women might have the most complex and fluid identities, as in most postcolonial nations, women identities are tied to that of their husbands or father figures.

Cultural identities, as Stuart Hall informs us, “have histories... But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation... are subject to continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall, 1997).

Marriage and Family

Rich says “to have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness” (Rich, 1995). Marriage, particularly in the Indian context, is seen as an erasure of a woman’s hitherto identity and preferences. She is surrounded by a rigid code of ‘appropriateness’ that expects her to function in particular ways. Self- sacrifice is not only expected, but is cleverly glorified by our culture, which is nothing but a cruel ploy to push the woman to never ending slavery.



In most of her narratives, a married woman is often trapped in an unhappy marriage, denied sexual, emotional or humane rights. Very often, her heroines scandalize the so-called norms of the society by putting their physical urges before the needs of their children. In her novella *Karineela*, the protagonist is a married woman who is in a search for her man from the previous births. The desire for her man is so strong that she forsakes everything to be with him, to lure him.

In *Soorpanakha*, the protagonist, when expressing her desire for a live-in relationship, is asked by her lover, for her 'rate', implying that she is a sex worker. Her heroines are not brave or

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bold according to the conventional standards, but they very often rise above the expected patterns of behaviour in subtle ways. Motherhood plays a key role in her stories, be it the way it strangles the identity of a woman, or how the society uses it as a trope to do so. In most of her stories, breast milk is found to be an important image, often used with a purpose of de-familiarization. In her story *Aattukattil*, the protagonist is a woman who develops a strong aversion to milk, which sprang from a childhood memory when she saw blood, instead of milk trickling from the udders of a cow. She juxtaposes the memory with the tale of baby Krishna, who drank lifeblood from the breasts of Poothana, the demoness. In *Soorpanakha*, the title so politically employed to allude to that epic character whose nose and breasts were unfairly chopped off by the Rama Lakshmana duo, the protagonist is a feminist who was also a social worker. She is told by her husband that for a woman, there is no other social duty higher than breast feeding. Ironically, in course of time, she removes her breasts, due to breast cancer.

In *Meerasadhu*, Thulasi, the protagonist kills her child, out of angst for her life wrecked by her licentious husband. Nietzsche had been vehemently criticized in literary circles for a statement of his, which had evoked quite an uproar. He opined that a woman's true source of power is her capacity to bear offspring, and that is the motivation that guides a woman in her relationship with a man. The author has prescribed to this thought in some of her works. Especially in her works like *Karineela*, the protagonist has a strong urge to bear a child that has the features of her lover. In a way, she goes back to the natural feminine instincts without prescribing to the societal norms and notions. Motherhood is a powerful and is employed efficiently by the postcolonial feminist writers. The themes of Mother, motherland and motherhood have combined to form a new movement in many African countries called motherism.

Body, Desire and Sexuality

Bessie Head and African American poets look at how the woman's body becomes the site of patriarchal and colonial oppression:

An important mechanism of regulating women's sexuality is through discourses of morality. In most post-colonial nations, sexuality is coded as morality- to be moral is to be monogamous, reticent about one's sexual preferences or even being asexual. (Nayar 2008)

In her narratives women with sexual appetite are often frowned upon, or are called prostitutes. Men, when they realize they fail to satisfy their partners find an easy way out in dubbing them immoral. In one of her short stories, *Vaanibham* (Sale), the protagonist Sukanya when confronted with the question of "rate", subtly asks the man his "rate". The possibility that a woman can also pay for sexual benefits, thus reducing the status of man to the commodity, is hitherto not thought of. Sidonie Smith suggests that women are represented as possessing an 'embodied subjectivity', rooted in their bodies. (Smith, 1993) Woman's destiny is determined and limited to her body, which she can escape only through selfless service that paradoxically denies her sexuality and body. That is, while her social role is determined by her being biologically female, her biological needs or features are what getting marginalized in a society where the man's biology becomes important.

Spirituality

Critics have observed that spirituality is often a trope by which patriarchy circumscribes the woman. But as an afterthought, women writers across many post-colonial nations have begun to include spiritual themes in their writings, as a mode of reacting, or 'writing back', especially as it goes against the 'global feminist' discourses:

They locate within the spiritual-which they clearly distinguish from the religious-possibilities of a more emancipated society. This kind of feminism often emphasizes a retrieval of pre-colonial, local and native forms of the sacral. It becomes a truly post-colonial condition because it seeks inspirations and sources within local traditions while also seeking a transformation of the tradition.
(Nayar,2008)

Spirituality being a theme specifically related to the lore and legends of the Indian subcontinent, it abounds in K. R. Meera's writings, especially the dark and dense colours of her homeland, Kerala. Lord Krishna features in many of her writings, usually carrying the role of a romantic prospect, or in some cases, that of a son. In her novella *Meerasadhu*, the woman protagonist falls in love with Madhavan, a man true to his name, has many relationships. Interestingly, the author shatters the romanticized aspects about the image as the protagonist finally realizes the bitterness of having had to live with a person who neglects his wife. She kills her child and leaves for Mathura, where she spends rest of her life as a sadhu, serving Lord Krishna. Ironically, she realizes the fraudulent ways the place is run, bursting the romanticized bubble yet again. She goes back to the pre-colonial form of the sacral through constant usage of images like Black Magic and snake gods. Women who act and think different are often thought to be under the spell of black magic and are treated with the help of magicians. This alludes to the witch hunting practices that existed worldwide, which can be traced back to years. Snakes are another constant presence in her narratives. They are not represented beasts of potential danger but as benevolent gods, or symbols of passion and lust. It plays the latter role in *Karineela*, where the narrator considers herself to be a highly poisonous snake. In *Sarpayajnam*, a snake rescues the protagonist from the clutches of her evil husband.

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