The 'New Woman' of the Gender Paradoxical Kerala: A Study on K.R. Meera's *Qabar*

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This paper attempts to examine the concept of the 'New Woman' within the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala, considering the prevailing "gender paradox" in the state. The analysis is based on the novella *Qabar* by the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author K.R. Meera. It is both a feminist tract and a pure fantasy romance infused with magical realism. *Qabar* is the story of Bhavana Sachidanandan, a single mother who grapples with raising her son with ADHD amidst societal challenges. The paper aims to analyse the two main female characters, Bhavana and her mother, who represent modern Keralan women, both educated and working, albeit from two generations. The paper will explore both the commonalities and disparities in their perceptions. In addition to exploring how the concept has evolved in a state like Kerala, the paper also seeks to understand how a prolific feminist writer, such as K.R. Meera, envisions women in contemporary society.

Keywords: Gender-paradox, 'New Woman', K.R. Meera, Qabar, Keralan woman

Introduction

Kerala is hailed as the epitome of gender development in India. Celebrated for its social indicators in women's education, health and literacy, Kerala has made notable progress in human development indices like low infant mortality rates, long life expectancy, near-

universal literacy rate and high levels of health and nutritional well-being for women and children. It is a model for other Indian states on how to achieve a good quality of life despite a relatively low income. Despite this remarkable accomplishment, there exists a "Gender Paradox" in Kerala, which, according to Sharmila Sreekumar (2007), refers to the "'contradiction' whereby women's high showing in socio-demographic indicators of development exists simultaneously with their low public participation and the increasing incidence of violence upon them" (p. 34). In a state celebrated for its highest literacy rates in India and commendable social development metrics, there has been a significant threefold increase in violence against women in the post-millennial period (Nithya, 2013, p. 1). There is also an alarming increase in female foeticide in Kerala, with the infant sex ratio declining fast. Even when the state boasts of high female literacy rates, it has the lowest female labour force. In contradiction, women do not experience the freedom expected given the state's higher levels of development indices. This calls attention to understanding how higher levels of developmental indices can co-exist with women's powerlessness. In the aforementioned context in Kerala, it would be interesting to look at the concept of the 'New Woman' through an analysis of literature written by Keralan women that reflects their own experiences. For this purpose, K.R. Meera's *Qabar* has been selected as the primary text.

Evolution of New Woman

The term 'New Woman' was first used by Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question", published in the *North American Review* in the late 19th century. She employed the term to describe women who were independent and not willing to conform to the norms of society. It was further developed by Henry James to refer to the rising number of educated and independent career-oriented women of the West. The concept transformed and evolved over the centuries at different stages, periods, and geographical factors.

'New Woman' is a feminist epitome and a cultural model that challenges and unsettles the orthodox gender roles as well as norms expected of women. The dominant precept is women wielding

their autonomy and being able to make decisions on their own. The concept of a 'New Woman' needs to take into justification a number of elements from the Victorian Dress Reform Act, the first wave of feminism, and voting rights to mundane and everyday choices such as education and marriage. Nora from Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* is perhaps one of the earliest examples of a 'New Woman' figure from literature. It is critical to examine the evolution of the concept at this juncture. The 'New Woman' as a concept originated in the West and gained prominence during the late 19th century and early 20th-century Victorian England. In Victorian society, women were secondary to men. They saw a woman's role as one restricted to the homestead, their function designed only to marry, breed, and care for the family members. They reinforced the restrictions on women through a conventional mode of dressing them in tight corsets, heavy fabrics and ornaments, which affected their health too. This changed only when a law was enacted in the 19th century, the Dress Reform Act, which championed more relaxed and functional drapes for the feminine. Likewise, the women of the early Victorian era hardly had access to formal schooling. The Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 brought boys and girls aged 5 to 13 under compulsory elementary schooling. This not only ensured equal opportunity for education, but women's career aspects received a boost with these Acts, and a number of women took up the professions of caretakers and governesses. Women were still denied the wider career opportunities available to men, but the steady changes marked the evolution of the role of women in society. But what was crucial in shaping the perception of the idea of the 'New Woman' was the first wave of feminism. The primary focus here was women's suffrage. The image of the passive, subservient women of the Victorian era went for a toss when women fought to vote as their right, and they started partaking dynamically in politics and society.

The Second Wave of Feminism further broadened the scope of the 'New Woman' by addressing various forms of gender-based disparities, including bodily rights, reproductive rights, equal pay, workplace equality, and sexual autonomy, to name a few. As society progressed and over the course of time, the concept of the 'New

Woman' continued to evolve, reflecting the shifting dynamics of society. The Third wave of feminism stressed the need for inclusivity and diversity and discussed intersectionality. The 'New Woman' thus represents a diverse and inclusive space that addresses any challenges women face across various contexts. Looking at the trajectory of its evolution from the late 19th century to contemporary times, the 'New Woman' symbolise progress, empowerment, and equality. This paper attempts to look at the concept by placing it in Kerala and within the body of literature written by Keralan women in the post-millennial period, considering the gender paradoxical situation in Kerala.

'New Woman' in *Qabar*

K.R. Meera is an accomplished writer and journalist from Kerala who is vocal about women's issues. Her fiction deals with patriarchy, power dynamics in society, experiences of women, etc. Winner of significant awards, including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2013) and Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award (2015), her novel *Aarachaar* (*The Hang Woman*) was shortlisted for the 2016 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. This paper analyses *Qabar,* published in Malayalam in 2020 and translated into the English in 2021. *Qabar* employs magical realism to narrate the story of Bhavana Sachidanandan, an Additional District Judge. Although it has a pure fantasy romance at its core, it is also a feminist manifesto. This paper examines the two central female characters in the novella - Bhavana and her mother, who represent the modern Keralan woman within the conceptual framework of 'New Woman'. They are both educated, employed, and financially independent. The paper will examine the similarities and disparities in their attitudes since they belong to two generations.

Bhavana's mother is nameless in the narrative. Working as a peon in the collectorate, she serves as a metaphor that underscores her identity as a symbolic archetype rather than an individual endowed with distinct characteristics. She embodies the quintessential woman in every Indian household, a deliberate choice by the writer to represent the myriad women bound to domestic life by societal expectations and patriarchal norms. The anonymity surrounding her character is a

testament to the universal nature of women's experiences. The deliberate omission of a name may be interpreted as a commentary on the historical erasure of women's voices. This is how Bhavana describes her mother:

> Amma woke up at 3 a.m. every day to make breakfast, lunch and snacks for you, for us kids, for Appoopan and Ammooma and then ran full tilt for the 8 a.m. bus. She used to pleat her sari while running for the bus. She rushed back into the house at seven in the evening. She'd change out of her sari and go straight into the kitchen. Fish curry, two different vegetables, prep for the next morning's breakfast. Until she retired at fifty-six, I never saw my mother sit down once, not even on Sundays. (Meera, 2020/2021, p. 31)

Despite all she has done for her family, her efforts are unrecognised. Her father says, "Every woman in this country does all that" (Meera, 2020/2021, p. 31). Her actions are perceived as duty, and expectations are continually placed upon her. It also highlights the loveless marriage between the couple. Not once do we witness the father speaking affectionately about his wife. Her identity remains unrecognised, consistently taken for granted. Her designated role in the family is to ease their lives, and any failure to fulfil this duty results in immediate blame. This suggests and implies an expectation and assumption that every woman is obligated to fulfil specific roles, with societal norms overlooking the inherent injustice in these expectations and treating them as if they were her duty.

Bhavana's mother is a complex woman. She is aware of the injustices she faces but stoically endures them for the sake of her children, reflecting the resilience many women share. The pivotal moment on the eve of Bhavana's wedding unveils the mother's perspective on motherhood – that her role may conclude with Bhavana's marriage and might be needed again during her daughter's pregnancy. After that, she decides to embark on a pilgrimage to Kashi. Bhavana is doubtful whether her father would agree to it. Her mother states: "I am talking about ending this business of asking for permission. I am retiring in seven years. By then, I want a scrap of land and a

one-room house. A room of my own" (Meera, 2020/2021, p. 51). This statement adds depth to the portrayal of Bhavana's mother as a woman with her own dreams and plans, independent of traditional roles. The mother's resolute stance signals a departure from societal norms, emphasising her commitment to realising her goals while balancing her responsibilities.

The mother decides to move out following a disagreement with the father over a dog.

> When I am nearing home at seven o'clock at night, sometimes I am the only one in that back lane. My one companion on that stretch used to be a brown dog. I would feed him leftover teatime snacks from the office. One day, I saw that a car had hit him and broken his leg. I couldn't just stand there and do nothing. I picked him up and brought him here. I did it because I thought this was my house. That is the day I understood that this wasn't my house. I can't bring home a hapless animal if I want to. I have no right to give it a place to rest or feed it for a day if I want to. (Meera, 2020/ 2021, p. 52)

Now, she lives in a mud house with just a hall, a kitchen and a bathroom. But "In this house, everything Amma wanted, she had at her fingertips. And it had nothing that Amma didn't want" (Meera, 2020/ 2021, p. 47). Transitioning to a new, simpler house of mud, the narrative emphasises the contrast between material comforts and emotional fulfilment. Despite its modesty, the new home becomes a sanctuary where the mother finds everything she desires within her reach. This shift underscores her agency and the pursuit of contentment, revealing a complex character navigating the intricacies of familial relationships and personal well-being. It evokes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where she asserts, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (p. 7). Bhavana's mother hints at a deeper longing for inner fulfilment and personal agency—a space where she can pursue her desires and assert control over her life. Unfortunately, despite earning, it appears she lacks control over her finances. However, Swapna Mukhopadhyay (2007) observes a particular pattern in Kerala wherein,

> Cultural norms, societal expectations, and structural inequalities often contribute to a scenario where women lack complete control over their earned income. Patriarchal structures in specific contexts dictate men's control of household finances, thereby limiting women's decision-making authority regarding their earnings. Consequently, while women contribute to household income through earnings, their lack of equal control or agency over financial matters undermines their prospects for achieving genuine economic empowerment and independence. (p. 9)

Although the novel does not explicitly mention the education of the mother, she is seen reading books all the time, including English. In one scene, she's engrossed in The Vegetarian, a book that won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. Her reading habit must have kept her ahead of her time. She even mocks her daughter,

> With this judge job of yours, you have no time to read novels, I suppose!' she added rudely. Two hours to the office. Two hours back home. Sitting when I had a seat. Standing when I didn't have one. That's how I read all that I read. (Meera, 2020/ 2021, p. 48)

The mother's perspective on love and relationships is clear and pragmatic. She highlights the contrast between the idealised notion of family as heaven and the reality of it being a constant, demanding job. Her analogy of home as a workplace, emphasising the absence of leave and promotion, reflects the continuous and unacknowledged efforts in maintaining a family. The mention of a "good service entry" at work versus the lack of acknowledgement for one's efforts at home suggests a disparity in recognition and appreciation. Despite the realistic tone, the mother hopes her daughter's life will not necessarily follow the same pattern. The advice not to be dejected acknowledges the challenges that may arise but also encourages resilience and a realistic understanding of the complexities of life and relationships.

The mother gives a mix of cautionary advice and support, drawing on her experiences to provide a pragmatic perspective on the dynamics of love and family life. Bhavana may have internalised the lessons and attitudes shared by her mother regarding the nature of love and family life. The mother's emphasis on love as a sense of

completeness rather than a service charge and comparing family life to a continuous, demanding job could have influenced Bhavana's outlook on relationships.

In contrast to her mother, Bhavana's circumstances are different. Her education and career give her more privilege. Perhaps the combination of these privileges, besides the wisdom passed down by her mother, serves as strength as she seeks divorce from her husband, a person for whom she once held deep affection. However, again, the predominant factor is her son's well-being rather than her own. She emulates her mother's behaviour and values, prioritising her son's welfare over her own.

Significantly, Pramod and Bhavana have the same educational qualifications, they are classmates. However, to be his wife, she needs to bring in much more. Bhavana hails from a lower middle-class background, her father being a clerk and her mother a peon. Pramod is from an affluent family. Bhavana makes her father take a loan and build a concrete house to match Pramod's affluence and not bring him shame. She saves every penny she earns to buy 100 gold sovereigns, a customary bridal gift. Initially, Bhavana is a typical lass, making sacrifices and pleasing her husband. She is so much in love with him that, for several years, she observes 'the Monday fast', a popular penance, to attain his wifehood.

Post-marriage, Pramod is not comfortable with Bhavana receiving praise for her work. Bhavana gives up important cases to avoid hurting his ego. She does not appear for the Magistrate selection exam because Pramod has yet to pass it. Bhavana describes herself:

> There was a woman who had done all these things. That woman never wore a sari that Pramod did not like. She found no joy in things unless they gave Pramod joy. She did not want to breathe without asking Pramod for permission. (Meera, 2020/ 2021, p. 41)

To cover up for his ego, Bhavana's fertility is questioned. When medical tests point to Pramod requiring treatment, he starts abusing her emotionally and physically. Then, Advaith is born and diagnosed with ADHD. Pramod adopts an indifferent attitude toward the child. This is when their marriage finally ends, despite Bhavana

enduring so much and making sacrifices that affect even her career. As Bhavana realises their being together would prove detrimental to their son, she decides to get a divorce. The transformation Bhavana undergoes can be connected to her motherhood. It is not for her sake that she walks out of her marriage. Had Pramod been kind to Advaith, she might have tolerated Pramod and even sacrificed her career. In many ways, she is a replica of her mother.

Katharina von Ankum (1995) observes that the women writers of the 1920s and 1930s portray single motherhood as an emancipatory image (p. 173). This Western concept reached Kerala quite late. Bhavana's mother must have endured a loveless marriage, fearing the stigma around a divorced mother with a daughter. Bhavana is not worried about the taboo. The shift in thinking could be a result of modernisation in Kerala. J. Devika (2019) talks about the influence of colonialism and Victorian values that shaped the role of women as mothers in the context of modernisation in Kerala. Devika says: "An ideal woman is imagined to possess both the 'natural' disposition as well as the practical, socially acquired ability to physically care for her family members, especially the young, and also to cultivate their inner selves" (p. 3). Bhavana and her mother can be seen as typical examples of this. While Bhavana's mother waited for her daughter's wedding to come out of her marriage, Bhavana came out of hers in order to get her son a better life. Barbara Kosta (1995) discusses the possibility of reconceptualising motherhood as the "tenuous promise of a new family structure in a modern, secular society that does not bind marriage with maternity" (p. 282). Perhaps this explains the differing perspectives on motherhood between Bhavana and her mother, reflecting a generational gap.

Conclusion

The coexistence of favourable indices such as high literacy rates and potentially higher life expectancy for women alongside increased rates of violence and crimes against women emphasises the complexity of gender dynamics in Kerala. While positive indicators suggest advancements in education and potentially better healthcare access for women, the persistence of violence indicates underlying

societal challenges, including entrenched cultural norms, systemic inequalities, and inadequate legal protections.

Swapna Mukhopadhyay (2007) notes that,

> An informed reading of the history of social reforms in the state from a feminist perspective suggests that while all social reformers have emphasised the importance of female literacy, the proposed 'emancipation of women has invariably been looked upon as an instrument that is to be used for the benefit of the family and society, not for the benefit of the woman as an individual in her own right. Literacy may even have been an instrument facilitating the process of internalisation of that message. The message has clearly gone very deep in Kerala society, for in terms of gender-related issues in public life, Malayalee society continues to be very conservative. (p. 13)

Both Bhavana and her mother embody the essence of 'New Woman' at slightly different levels of the term's evolution. Bhavana's decision to leave a life controlled by a toxic system is strengthened and hastened by her mother's calculated bold move, albeit made late in the latter's life. They have autonomy owing to their financial independence and the desire to exert their choices in life. Education and financial independence certainly helped them exercise agency over their lives, particularly for Bhavana. However, the responsibilities of motherhood impose certain constraints on their lives. They aptly represent the complexities of modern Keralan women. It is crucial to recognise the significance of an intersectional approach that takes into account factors such as caste, class, and religion alongside gender to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plight of Keralan women. The paper also throws light on how standardised gender development indices such as education and medical facilities are inadequate to measure the status of women.

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