



Trauma, Patriarchal Norms, and the Reconfiguration of Identity in K. R. Meera's *Jezebel*

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KR Meera's *Jezebel* intertwines the traditional biblical myth with the lived experiences of its modern-day protagonist by creating a complex work challenging both ancient cultural myths and contemporary power structures between genders. This paper examines how the novel addresses trauma through the imposition of patriarchal norms and religious doctrines within the familial setting by reconstructing the historical Jezebel archetype as a symbol of resistance and self-assertion. It engages the trauma theory and feminist literary criticism and uses a qualitative methodology that integrates close textual analysis and intertextual comparison. The study explores the protagonist's journey from enforced subjugation to emergent self-awareness. This embodies the internalisation of oppressive narratives as well as the potential for transformative deconstruction of inherited symbols. The research critically examines the mechanisms through which cultural and familial pressures are communicated and contested by showing that the oppressive depictions of female vice and moral decay are not immutable truths, but are socially constructed instruments of control. The study also argues that reinterpreting these symbols enables a redefinition of female identity, offering new avenues for empowerment and resistance. *Jezebel* challenges reductive moral judgments and contributes to contemporary debates on trauma and

gender by revealing how literary texts can act as vehicles for subverting and repurposing oppressive narratives.

KeyWords: Biblical Myth, Archetype, Trauma, Gender, Identity

Introduction

K. R. Meera's *Jezebel* stages a critical dialogue between the biblical Jezebel and a contemporary woman who inherits that name. It employs familial and religious discourse to dramatise the cultural manufacture of female vice and shame. While the biblical Jezebel is conventionally represented as a paradigmatic transgressor (New International Version, 2 Kings 9:30–37), Meera's novel relocates that archetype within the intimate grammar of family, ritual, and moral instruction to show how patriarchal authority produces trauma in women. This study asks: (1) How does *Jezebel* represent trauma through familial and scriptural discourses? (2) In what ways does Meera's reworking of the Jezebel myth contest patriarchal imperatives? (3) How does that reframing enable the protagonist's reconfiguration of identity? Answering these questions places the novel in conversation with both trauma studies and feminist critique. It also addresses a relative lacuna in scholarship on how biblical archetypes are reappropriated in regional literatures to negotiate gendered injury and resilience. The study employs an integrated framework of trauma theory, feminist criticism, and intertextual analysis. The research contributes to scholarly debates by demonstrating how intertextual reinterpretation of mythic figures can function both as instruments of disciplinary power and as resources for ethical redefinition and female agency.

Literature Review

K. R. Meera has been studied extensively for her feminist sensibilities, her exploration of history, myth, and agency in Malayalam literature. There is a significant lack of scholarship that examines her works explicitly through the lens of biblical archetypes. *Viewing K. R. Meera's Qabar Through a Feminist Lens* explores themes of religious polarisation, feminist sensibility and magic realism, but does not engage with biblical narratives or archetypes (Rekha & Manjula, 2024). *Rewriting Women: A Critique of Misogyny, Structure and*

Agency in the Novels of K. R. Meera - A Review focuses on patriarchal structures, agency, and misogyny. These works do not place Meera's characters in dialogue with scriptural figures or explicitly mythic intertexts (Rekha & Manjula, 2022). In the wider field, regional retellings and reworkings of biblical or mythic figures are recognised in Indian literature and postcolonial studies. But there remains a gap in how Malayalam fiction, particularly works by K. R. Meera, reimagines female biblical archetypes in contemporary cultural and religious settings. The study addresses this lacuna by reading *Jezebel* as a reconfiguration of the biblical Queen Jezebel, focussing on gendered trauma, ritual speech, and scriptural framing in a Kerala context. This paper contributes both to Meera scholarship and comparative literature by offering an analysis of how independent women are both scripted by and resist inherited religious and familial discourses.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that draws on Trauma Theory, Feminist Literary Criticism, and Intertextual Analysis to read K. R. Meera's *Jezebel* as a site where biblical myth, familial practice, and gendered trauma intersect. Each approach contributes a complementary analytic lens. These frameworks enable a reading that treats individual psychology and cultural inscription as mutually informing processes.

Trauma Theory provides the language for identifying narrative forms of disruption and delayed testimony (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992). Drawing on key ideas from contemporary trauma studies, this study treats motifs of silence, fragmented recall, and embodied repetition as markers of both personal and inherited distress. The novel's formal strategies, recurrent images, halting disclosures, and patterns of return are read as narrative evidence of traumatic structuring rather than as isolated stylistic devices.

Feminist Literary Criticism supplies the second axis of analysis, focusing on how gendered subjectivity is produced through normative social practices. Theorisations of performativity (Butler, 1990) and the dynamics of representational power illuminate how

gender roles are reiterated and policed within family and community. This study situates those categories within feminist interventions that emphasise caste, class, communal religion, and kinship as central axes shaping the lived experiences of women rather than relying solely on global theoretical categories (Mohanty, 2003b; Tong, 2009). This regional framing makes visible the particular mechanisms, such as ritual enforcement, kinship policing, and moral discourse, through which shame and obedience are naturalised in domestic life. This research thereby brings feminist scholarship into dialogue with broader feminist theory, prevents decontextualised readings, and foregrounds local histories of coloniality and social stratification. Work by scholars who critique universalising models of “woman” (Mohanty, 2003a; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) highlights how gendered experience is mediated by region-specific structures and practices. This perspective, when applied to the novel, helps explain why maternal enforcement and scriptural authority operate as forms of intimate violence that are simultaneously moralised by community discourse and embedded in everyday kinship relations.

The framework also applies Intertextual Analysis by tracing how the novel engages with and revises antecedent narratives and cultural archetypes. Drawing especially on Kristeva’s (1980) semiotic notion of intertextuality and the idea of texts as part of a network of discourses, religious, literary, and historical that the novel both inherits and contests this method treats the text as part of that discursive field. Mapping these textual conversations reveals how stigmas attached to an archetype can be transferred into domestic speech and practice and, crucially, how those very resources can be reconfigured within the narrative for acts of dissent or self-fashioning.

These theoretical strands are held together by reflexivity: the study reads Jezebel as both a psychological account and a cultural document. Trauma theory supplies the grammar for understanding rupture and return; feminist criticism expanded through regional interventions explains the social architecture that produces gendered constraints; and intertextual analysis emphasises how mythic and scriptural materials are mobilised and contested within family life. Together, these approaches enable a reading attentive to textual form,

sociocultural specificities, and the ethical stakes of reinterpreting oppressive archetypes.

Methodology

This qualitative study used an interpretive, single-text design combining close reading, iterative extract selection, and thematic coding to trace how familial and scriptural discourses constitute gendered trauma in *Jezebel*. Extract selection followed explicit criteria: passages that (a) engage family or scriptural discourse, (b) stage gendered obligation or transgression, or (c) display narrative traits associated with traumatic structuring (repetition, silence, return). Selected excerpts were logged with page references and analytic memos to preserve provenance. Coding proceeded in two cycles: an initial deductive coding using trauma- and feminist-derived categories, followed by inductive coding to capture emergent motifs. Codes were recorded in a spreadsheet and compiled into a codebook with definitions, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and exemplar quotations. Analytic rigour was pursued through confirmatory rereads, reflexive memoing, and triangulation. The thematic coding was complemented by intertextual analysis, which situated the coded extracts within broader discursive frameworks. This included the biblical Jezebel narrative, Hazleton's revisionist interpretations, and feminist theoretical interventions. By placing textual fragments in dialogue with these intertexts, the analysis traced how inherited myths and cultural archetypes are both reiterated and reconfigured in Meera's novel. Given the single-text focus, generalisability is limited; the paper therefore emphasises depth, contextualisation, and transparency of analytic procedure.

Analysis

Familial Imposition of Patriarchal Norms and Religious Shame

Ammachi's role in *Jezebel* functions as the family's chief moral arbiter, and her repeated recitations of Biblical injunctions operate to naturalise women's subordination. By urging women to yield to their husbands and invoking Christ as "the head and saviour of the church" (Meera, 2022, p. 62), Ammachi frames obedience as a theological imperative rather than a social artefact. Her further citation of the proverb that extols a wife whose "worth is far above rubies"

(Meera, 2022, p.106) exemplifies a cultural discourse that equates virtue with self-effacement and service to men. The intersection of familial authority, religious injunction, and patriarchal enforcement acts as reinforcement of male dominance through religious idiom. This ultimately leads to the silencing of women's subjectivity under the guise of moral duty. Ammachi also enforces patriarchal injunctions through biblical edicts, demanding, "Are you wiser than God?" (Meera, 2022, p. 29). The rhetoric silences dissent by placing divine authority above lived experience. It employs coercion through piety, converting theological judgment into a domestic policing mechanism that delegitimises the protagonist's self-knowledge. In this way, Meera portrays how gendered subjugation is naturalised within domestic structures.

In Meera's narrative, the family serves as the primary site where religious discourse and communal reputation converge to shape and discipline female subjectivity. When Ammachi speaks on behalf of family honour, she intones: "the marriage has been announced in church... He is the man the Lord has willed for you." (Meera, 2022, p. 18). This utterance functions as a performative speech act: rather than merely describing a fact, it enacts and thereby forecloses objection to the match. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not a stable interior essence but is constituted through repeated, ritualised acts and speech that cite and reproduce social norms. As Butler puts it, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Ammachi's declaration thus exemplifies how familial and religious discourses performatively produce a gendered subjectivity and police acceptable female behaviour. The consequences of such familial and religious regulation are both corporeal and psychic. Ammachi's violent admonishments and beatings, such as branding Jezebel "Satan's child!" for an innocent game (Meera, 2022, p. 58), illustrate how shame and guilt are transmitted intergenerationally. Foucault's insight that power compels individuals to become "the principle of [their] own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 202) shows how these disciplinary practices cultivate self-surveillance. Read alongside Kauffman's formulation of shame

as the boundary of privacy, incubator of the self (Kauffman, 2002, p. 210), Meera's portrayal reveals how the protagonist internalises her mother's punitive moral codes, a process that simultaneously affords a sense of containment and enforces psychic constraint.

Ammachi's authoritative voice, steeped in religious absolutism, functions as both a conduit of patriarchal control and a catalyst for Jezebel's inner conflict. The tension between imposed identity and emerging subjectivity is central to Meera's feminist intervention: the painful but necessary process of self-reclamation becomes a pathway toward imagining freedom within oppressive familial and religious structures.

The Protagonist's Narrative and the Emergence of Resistance

K. R. Meera's *Jezebel* documents the protagonist's journey from internalised submission to active resistance with acute emotional depth and psychological complexity. At the outset, Jezebel is depicted as ensnared in the patriarchal and religious strictures imposed by her family. Even in childhood, her innocent explorations are harshly punished. When Ammachi discovers her behaviour, she responds with violent discipline, leaving the child's body scarred and her psyche steeped in shame (Meera, 2022, pp. 27–29). These formative encounters with repression create the conditions for Jezebel's later struggle with guilt, fear, and subordination.

As the narrative unfolds, Jezebel's inner monologue reveals not mere resignation but the stirrings of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies as a critical consciousness that unsettles internalised oppression. Reflecting on her forced marriage and years of suffering, Jezebel articulates the loss of happiness and autonomy that stemmed from unquestioning compliance (Meera, 2022, p. 139). This recognition is not simply a record of victimhood but an active re-reading of her own history, where the metaphor of illness and medicine - remedies that inflict deeper wounds highlights the oppressive effects of patriarchal prescriptions. In reframing these experiences, Jezebel begins to reclaim her bodily and emotional agency, demonstrating Mohanty's insistence that women's subjectivity emerges precisely in

moments when imposed categories are resisted rather than internalised (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 195).

In her confrontation, Jezebel recounts the dissonance between Ammachi's imposed values and her own lived suffering: "I agreed to the marriage proposal you found me... For two-and-a-half years, I suffered his, and his father's, cussing and swearing... All my happiness has gone. I can't take it any more" (Meera, 2022, p. 139). This outburst signifies a moment of self-realisation where Jezebel recognises the corrosive impact of patriarchal obedience. Rather than treating this solely as a personal lament, the intertextual analysis draws on feminist theory to mark this rupture as a critical point of resistance. As Mohanty argues, feminist critique must foreground women's historical and political agency rather than reproduce them as passive victims. Jezebel's articulation of her suffering, then, becomes not just a cry of despair but what Mohanty calls the transformation of lived experience into positive forms of struggle (Mohanty, 2003a, p. 502).

Her resistance takes concrete form in confrontations with familial and religious authority. In questioning Ammachi's invocations of Christian morality - "Who is Christian? That man who has no mercy for the poor, is he a Christian? The man who assaulted a little girl who sought refuge, is he a Christian?" (Meera, 2022, p. 139). Jezebel destabilises the patriarchal logic that cloaks itself in religious legitimacy. By exposing this hypocrisy, she reclaims interpretive authority and asserts a moral order grounded in justice rather than submission, embodying Mohanty's call to disrupt dominant epistemologies that universalise women as passive victims (Mohanty, 2003a, p. 510).

Equally significant is Jezebel's realisation that happiness is not externally bestowed but self-authored: "Hadn't she been living in a fool's paradise thinking that there was a special happiness destined for her and that it was now in someone else's custody? Hadn't she failed to realise that her happiness was her own responsibility?" (Meera, 2022, p. 139). This insight marks a decisive re-appropriation of agency. By rejecting the internalised belief that her fulfilment lies in dependency and obedience, Jezebel enacts the kind of feminist resistance Mohanty envisions, one that dismantles inherited notions

of female subordination and foregrounds women's active role in shaping their own futures (Mohanty, 2003a, pp. 510–517).

The culmination of her resistance is symbolised in the scene where she embraces Ammachi, declaring, “I will kill you with love” (Meera, 2022, p. 223). This paradoxical gesture captures the complexity of trauma and resilience: love becomes both a weapon and a mode of liberation, allowing Jezebel to transcend inherited violence without reproducing it.

Jezebel's trajectory from submission to resistance thus functions as a feminist counter-narrative. Meera critiques patriarchal control and religious orthodoxy while simultaneously reimagining Jezebel, the biblical symbol of transgression, as an emblem of self-empowerment within feminist literary contexts.

Intertextual Reconfigurations: The Jezebel Myth and the Reconfiguration of Identity

K.R.Meera's *Jezebel* stages a sustained intertextual conversation in which the biblical Jezebel functions both as an instrument of vilification and as a resource for reimagining subjectivity. Read alongside Lesley Hazleton's revisionist account, the novel exposes how the Jezebel figure is not an immutable moral type but a historically and linguistically constructed instrument for policing female behaviour. Hazleton asks, “Why did none of you try to find out why this name later became Isabel, meaning ‘woman of dung’?” (Hazleton, 2007, as cited in Meera, 2022, p. 130). This rhetorical question foregrounds the linguistic work of vilification and alerts readers to how names themselves can be transformed into instruments of shame. Hazleton's biographical reframing of Jezebel as a teenager uprooted from Tyre into Samaria clarifies the cultural disjunction that underwrites subsequent moral condemnation and provides Meera with a framework to challenge inherited judgments (Hazleton, 2007, as cited in Meera, 2022, p. 108). The novel's mythic layer foregrounds Jezebel's displacement as a young sea-born princess forced into the arid world of tribal laws. This relocation functions as a metaphor for the imposition of rigid patriarchal norms upon an identity associated with fluidity, openness, and communal freedom (Meera, 2022, p. 160).

Hazleton's reinterpretation of the biblical Jezebel as a woman whose identity is externally constructed, her very name shifting from "Isabel" to "woman of dung", provides the intertextual ground for Meera's critique. Meera complicates this by introducing moments of agency: her protagonist recognises that fulfilment rests not on external validation but on her own capacity for self-definition (Meera, 2022, p. 139). Hazleton's rendering of "Isabel" into a "woman of dung" is not merely pejorative renaming but a discursive act that strips a woman of linguistic dignity. Meera picks up this semantic erasure and reverses it by letting her protagonist reclaim language as a site of identity-making. This reclamation resonates with Mohanty's argument that resistance by Third World women often inheres in the silences and fissures of hegemonic discourse, where writing and self-narration become strategies of oppositional agency (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 82). Meera's protagonist asserts agency within restrictive familial and religious norms by redefining herself through language and self-expression; she resists externally imposed narratives and participates in a feminist reclamation of subjectivity.

The intertextual collision between myth and familial narrative is not merely additive but transformative. In reworking the Jezebel archetype, the protagonist challenges its conventional association with immorality and instead reclaims it as a locus of agency. Her defiant assertion, "I live like a queen. I'm not a widow. I will never need to weep and wail" (Meera, 2022, p. 223), functions as a performative act that refuses the patriarchal script of mourning. In doing so, she destabilises the ritualised roles of widowhood imposed upon women and remakes the figure of Jezebel as a mode of political self-fashioning rather than moral deviance. This act exemplifies what Mohanty (2003b, pp. 81–83, 222–223) identifies as the emergence of feminist agency through the subversion of internalised oppression: the protagonist resists inherited cultural scripts that define her as a passive bearer of patriarchal meaning and instead asserts a self-authored subjectivity. By intertwining Hazleton's revisionist rereading of Jezebel with the textures of lived domestic experience, Meera not only unsettles the historical vilification attached to the biblical figure but also rearticulates the concept of resistance. This move echoes Mohanty's insistence on

decolonising feminist practices that are attentive to context, demonstrating how agency emerges when women reinterpret oppressive cultural scripts through their own situated knowledges.

The entwining of mythic and familial narratives illustrates how intertextual dynamics can become instruments for reconstructing identity. Meera demonstrates that oppressive cultural symbols need not be passively inherited; they can be dismantled, reimagined, and harnessed to affirm female agency and resilience.

Findings

Jezebel represents trauma transmitted through familial and scriptural discourses. Ammachi's recitation of biblical injunctions exemplifies how religious language functions as a domestic policing mechanism. Through such speech acts and embodied punishment, patriarchal authority naturalises obedience, instils guilt, and silences female subjectivity. The novel thereby illustrates how trauma is sustained not only through violence but also through ritualised moral discourse embedded in family life. At the same time, Meera's reworking of the Jezebel myth contests these patriarchal imperatives by exposing their contradictions and limits. The protagonist's recognition of her suffering, her rejection of obedience as destiny, and her confrontation with Ammachi's religious hypocrisy mark critical breaks in internalised subordination. These moments demonstrate that trauma, while deeply inscribed, does not foreclose the possibility of resistance. Instead, the narrative depicts how women reframe inherited scripts through acts of reinterpretation and dissent.

Finally, the study shows that identity in *Jezebel* is reconfigured through intertextual negotiation. By juxtaposing Hazleton's revisionist account of the biblical Jezebel with the protagonist's experiences, the novel dismantles linguistic and historical mechanisms of vilification. The protagonist's self-authored claims that her insistence on defining her own happiness and subjectivity transforms the Jezebel archetype into a site of agency. In doing so, the novel reclaims a figure long marked by shame and reimagines her as a resource for empowerment within feminist contexts. The findings establish that Jezebel is both a narrative of trauma and a text of reconfiguration. It demonstrates

how patriarchal authority is reproduced through family and religion, but also how myth and memory can be rewritten to affirm resilience and female subjectivity.

Conclusion

This study has shown that K. R. Meera's Jezebel reimagines the biblical archetype not merely to record female suffering but to rework a stigmatising myth into a discursive resource for agency. Through close readings that attend to ritualised speech, embodied punishment, and rhetorical inversion, the novel exposes how familial and religious discourse produce shame while also carving spaces for self-authorship. Read through the lenses of trauma theory, feminist criticism, and intertextual analysis, Jezebel's trajectory from internalised obedience to critical self-recognition reveals how oppressive symbols may be destabilised and re-signified within familial and cultural contexts. Although the single-text scope limits claims of generalisability, the study contributes to feminist and trauma scholarship by demonstrating a methodology for tracing how mythic materials are mobilised in literature to negotiate power, memory, and resilience. Future comparative or reception-based work could further test these dynamics across other regional appropriations of biblical and mythic figures. Ultimately, Jezebel performs a double work of witness and revision: it makes visible the psychic costs of patriarchal religiosity and, in doing so, models how narrative can convert stigmatic inheritance into a language of resistance.

Implications of the Study

The analysis contributes to feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating how intertextual reinterpretations of myth can function as tools for resisting entrenched gender hierarchies. It emphasises the importance of reading texts within their specific socio-cultural contexts, rather than through universalising feminist paradigms. By tracing the protagonist's journey from submission to resistance, the study illuminates how trauma and resilience coexist in literary representations. This insight is valuable for trauma studies, as it foregrounds literature's role in articulating not only psychic rupture but also the possibilities of recovery and reconfiguration.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers a nuanced reading of Jezebel, certain limitations remain. First, the analysis is confined to a single novel, which restricts the generalisability of its conclusions. A comparative study involving other literary reconfigurations of biblical or mythological figures would provide broader perspectives. Second, the focus has been primarily textual; integrating reader-response studies or interviews could extend understanding of how such narratives resonate in lived contexts. Finally, while this paper foregrounds feminist and trauma-theoretical frameworks, further engagement with postcolonial or psychoanalytic approaches could enrich the analysis.

Jezebel emerges as both a critique and a reclamation: it critiques the cultural mechanisms that sustain patriarchy while reclaiming archetypes to imagine alternative identities. By doing so, it demonstrates how literature can act as a transformative space where oppressive myths are not only contested but also re-authored to enable agency, resilience, and ethical redefinition.

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