


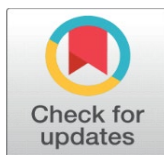


VIEWING K. R. MEERA'S *QABAR* THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

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Received 05 April 2024

Accepted 10 May 2024

Published 10 June 2024

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DOI

[10.29121/granthaalayah.v12.i5.2024.5629](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v12.i5.2024.5629)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Technology and social media have played an increasingly significant role in shaping feminism in India over the past few decades, encouraging widespread mobilization and awareness. Over time, a number of legal reforms have been implemented to protect women's rights, including the use of online platforms to address pressing issues such as sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and workplace discrimination. In addition to laws prohibiting dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and ensuring equal pay for equal work, these laws are also in place. Despite significant strides, feminism in India still faces challenges, including deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and underrepresentation of women in positions of power and decision-making. However, the movement continues to make progress, with more women actively participating in various spheres of public life. Women are increasingly advocating for their rights and speaking out against gender discrimination and violence. This is supported by a number of initiatives, such as the formation of women's collectives, the introduction of gender-sensitive laws, and awareness-raising campaigns. This research article shows how all these systems fail to rise above patriarchal norms and impart justice to women, unless she herself evolve. This research paper views Bhavana, the protagonist, as a self-established woman. The paper also analyses the novella as a specimen of magic realism and how it's a running political and social commentary.

Keywords: Qabar, K. R. Meera, Feminism, Magic Realism, Postcolonialism, Political Allegory

1. INTRODUCTION

Two social movements, postcolonialism and feminism, share a preoccupation with research and raises concerns on behalf of underprivileged groups, sharing a common theoretical arc. A common starting point for both feminism and postcolonial theory was an effort to flip the script on established gender, cultural, and racial hierarchy, and have gradually accepted the poststructuralist's call to reject the dualisms on which patriarchal and colonial power structures are based. According to [Gandhi \(1998\)](#), authority 'constructs itself.' Like other feminist theories, postcolonial theory in postcolonial discourse, the critique of colonialism is initially framed via the lens of gender, within Foucault's theory of knowledge and

power. However, what sets the movement different is an in-depth analysis of post-colonial life, focusing on the context of 'double colonialism'. Feminist Theory in the Postcolonial Era is a prime illustration of the degrading treatment of women in postcolonial countries, limited solely to locations important for cultural or biological reproduction. Every fight on every front, on every continent, for independence are also characterised by the presence of strong women. But after all the fighting is over, women only have access to purely domestic spaces. This article presents a critical analysis of postcolonial feminist thought, postcolonial theory, and liberal Western discourses. [Achyuta \(2008\)](#)

K. R. Meera's *Qabar* has received widespread critical acclaim for its intense portrayal of human emotions, existential dilemmas, and the underlying socio-cultural aspects. This paper will provide an overview of the novel and its significance, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis. This short novella contains elements of both social commentary and a personal voyage of discovery, as well as a dash of romance. It manages to get over rough areas with impressive ease. Despite its small size, it successfully identifies patterns of religious polarisation, prejudice, and patriarchal strictures and initiates conversations about these topics. The story is told from Bhavana Sachidanandan's point of view, an Additional District Judge and single mother who is presiding over a case involving the destruction of a qabar (grave) belonging to the petitioner's ancestors. Kaakkasseri Khayaluddin Thangal, the petitioner, is a well-dressed urbanite who disputes Bhavana's imagination of a skullcap-wearing, bearded clichéd Mappila. He has been described as having 'Sean Connery's body and Kamal Haasan's eyes.' Thangal is also an illusionist, mind-reader, djinn-worshipper, or magician, according to the one who is relating his tale. Thangal's illusions, which seem to be tapping into Bhavana's worries and aspirations, throw her carefully ordered life into disarray. Bhavana sees both rainbows and snakes. She keeps having nightmares about her ancestor, Yogishwaran Ammavan. She suffers from an obsession with the unresolved tales of two girls/goddesses from the legend surrounding Ammavan. [Angulo \(2018\)](#)

Currently, the law, or the way it is implemented in India, is subject to significant criticism. We are reminded that the legal system is biased in favour of the privileged. Bhavana sees herself as an upholder of justice because she is resolute in her belief, in the rightness of the law. According to her, the law requires evidence. During a conversation that appears to be a commentary on recent verdicts pertaining to land disputes, she asks Thangal a series of questions about the opposition to qabar's historical importance and that it is not hindered by lack of evidence, as qabar's importance is not determined by a single document, such as palm-leaf manuscripts. [Asayesh \(2017\)](#)

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research paper highlights the following as its objectives:

- 1) To analyse the novella from a feminist perspective.
- 2) To pinpoint the drawbacks of the law of the country in supporting the underprivileged.
- 3) To show how K. R. Meera showcases the protagonist Bhavana as a tough woman.
- 4) To showcase the novel as a social and political commentary.
- 5) To demand action in favour of the underprivileged.

3. METHODOLOGY

To interpret the novella in a feministic way, different feminist research papers are referred. For availing first-hand information various websites are made use of. Research based search engines like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, SSRN, and Academia.edu. are used for availing additional information. [Bagchi \(2022\)](#)

4. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

4.1. BHAVANA AS MEERA'S TOUGH WOMAN

Bhavana is a woman in her late twenties, exuding an aura of strength and determination. She stands at an average height, with a fit and athletic build. Her dark, wavy hair cascades down her shoulders, often tied back in a messy bun when she's engrossed in her pursuits. Her deep, almond-shaped eyes reveal a mixture of curiosity and wisdom, reflecting the many experiences that have shaped her life. Bhavana's attire usually consists of practical clothing, reflecting her no-nonsense approach to life. Bhavana possesses an unwavering sense of determination and resilience. Her inner strength is matched only by her intelligence and resourcefulness. She has an inquisitive mind and a thirst for knowledge, always eager to delve into the mysteries that life presents. Her sharp wit and problem-solving skills make her an invaluable asset in challenging situations. [Balakrishnan \(2022\)](#)

Though Bhavana is driven and focused, she is also deeply empathetic and caring. She has a way of connecting with others, understanding their emotions, and providing comfort when needed. Her ability to empathize makes her a natural leader, and Bhavana had a humble upbringing, growing up in a small village surrounded by nature's beauty. Her parents instilled in her a sense of wonder and respect for the world around her, which sparked her fascination with the unknown. Her mother is a stern, self-reliant woman, who left her husband when he denied her from curing a wounded dog. Her outlook on the world around her and the patriarchal notions surrounding her, thus teaching her daughter to stand strong and self-reliant. [Deepshikha \(2019\)](#)

As she grew older, Bhavana's thirst for knowledge led her to pursue higher education in archaeology and anthropology. She became an expert in ancient civilizations and historical artifacts, embarking on numerous adventures to uncover lost relics and untold stories. During one of her expeditions, she stumbled upon a mysterious map that would change the course of her life forever. In the novel '*Qabar*' Bhavana is the protagonist who embarks on a perilous journey to discover the truth behind the fabled tomb of a long-lost civilization. The tomb, known as qabar, is said to hold ancient secrets and untold treasures, drawing the interest of treasure hunters and historians alike. Bhavana's expertise and determination make her the perfect candidate to lead the expedition. [Jain \(2022\)](#)

Qabar is a story that focuses on a woman who is imprisoned and struggling to find redemption and freedom. The concept of freedom is presented as the ultimate goal, and the story is emotionally stirring, keeping readers on edge as the plot unfolds. The story explores the psychology of Bhavna, who is struggling to come to terms with her broken family and trying to put in the effort to forgive and accept herself for who she is. She finds herself stuck between her sense of morality and her human nature, leaving her feeling adrift. [John \(2023\)](#)

Emotions and religious convictions are strictly prohibited in Bhavana's courtroom. Yet, as she finds out, the qabar does exist, both as the remains of a building with minarets and in the minds of the people. Proof from official sources does not. The legal system has been unable to right the wrong of the qabar's destruction. Perhaps the author wants us to understand that history is comprised of more than simply facts and transactions written on paper (or palm-leaf manuscripts), but also of actual human experience, social and cultural norms, and the recollection of past events. Thangal's narrativization of the dehumanisation involved in having been the victim of a riot is one more way in which the reader is brought face to face with the communal divide that defines much of our contemporary reality beyond the prejudices that Bhavana acknowledges or the callousness with which the disputed qabar is demolished: 'Once a huge mob strip you naked and looks at your genitals to find out which side you are? If it happens to you, whether you're Hindu or Muslim, you cease to be a human being'. A moment where the family myths of Bhavana and Thangal combine and become indistinguishable serves as a revelatory illustration of the interchangeability of this religious identity and the subsequent meaninglessness of the harm we inflict on ourselves. [Kapur \(2015\)](#)

4.2. A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The text, *Qabar*, is a beautiful piece of literature that showcases the intricate character of Bhavna, a woman who possesses a unique perspective on life. Despite the rules and regulations imposed by society, Bhavna always tries to see beyond the surface and often finds herself in a constant battle with her inner self, which is filled with complex and buried emotions. The book *Qabar* is a literary masterpiece that explores the cultural and religious beliefs, myths, laws, and integrity of society with a feminist perspective. The author has skilfully woven the theme of magical realism and love into the storyline, making it a multi-faceted and multi-layered read. The text is filled with buried emotions that are slowly unfolded with each turn of the page, often destroying the tapestry that was created for the reader. *Qabar* is all about the voyage of exploring the identity in their true self, to reconcile with the identity of one's self and the search for a completeness, in the direction of finding someone who have compassion and perceives you to the fullest. [Lewis & Mills \(2003\)](#)

K. R. Meera does a fantastic job of playing the lead role of a woman portraying the lives of women living in the third world in Kerala, covered in a rainbow of fabrics. She delves deep into the postcolonial woman's condition; the key issues of postcolonial feminism are embodied in this collection of nude forms. Her female counterpart tales tend to be brazened and forceful, defying the accepted standards of society. When one looks at the Meera's works, it contains significant representations of key postcolonial feminist issues. K. R. Meera thus 'erodes stereotypes and reworks old identities and identity markers, myths, challenging the family's authority over women, the potential for egalitarian culture, and the application of religious dogma to the subjugation of women' [Jasen & Nayar \(2010\)](#).

Meera's staunch feminism permeates this work as well. Bhavana and her mother, the novel's two female protagonists, challenge and reject patriarchy at every turn. Both ladies escape unhappy marriages and make enlightened decisions to free themselves from sexist norms. There are echoes of both Mary Wollstonecraft's belief in marital equality and Virginia Woolf's argument that women want a separate space of their own. The most intriguing part of Meera's feminist perspective, however, is her investigation of the ways in which women's retellings of family history differ from those presented by males. According to Rich,

'to have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy says is the most important merges with biology to produce the concept of femininity' (Rich, 1995). Marriage, is considered as the destruction of a woman's previous identity and her independence, especially in the Indian culture preferences. A strict code of 'appropriateness' dictates how she should act in society in ways that are unique. In today's society, selflessness is not only accepted but even artfully celebrated which is a horrible plan to force the woman into indefinite servitude. In most of her stories, the protagonist is a married lady who is stuck in a bad relationship with her husband, sexually, emotionally, and her human rights are denied. Frequently, her protagonists shock the so-called standards by prioritising their own desires over those of their men and children. The experience of motherhood is central to her narratives, whether women's sense of self, or the ways in which this social stereotype is used to oppress women. Motherhood is a potent tool that is widely used successfully by the postcolonial feminist authors. [Mookherjee \(2005\)](#)

The story of Bhavana is one that is filled with pain, struggle, and ultimately triumph. Her journey towards self-discovery and reformation is fraught with challenges, especially due to the oppressive nature of patriarchy that is deeply ingrained in her family's customs and beliefs. Despite the hardships she faces, Bhavana refuses to give up on herself and her dreams, and with the help of her mother, she learns to stand up for herself and assert her own identity. Interestingly, the second half of the book delves into the ancestral history of Bhavana and Thangal, which helps to build a greater mythology around their family. The exchange of identity and the evolution of both ancestral and family histories form the foundation for the politics of the present day, leading to a profound impact on society and culture. [Perez & Chevalier \(2020\)](#).

Qabar is strongly feminist in Meera's outlook. In the ultimate act of rebellion and reclaiming her own agency, Bhavana's mother decides to serve injured animals rather than her husband and family. Bhavana describes the excesses of patriarchal expectation that her mother fulfilled for almost the entirety of her married life, only refusing to adjust and erase herself when her husband refused to allow her to take care of a severely injured dog, in a manner reminiscent of 2021's eerily accurate Malayalam-language domestic-drama *The Great Indian Kitchen*. She reminds him that she never saw her mother sit down, not even on Sundays, until she retired at the age of fifty-six. His reaction was, 'Every woman in this country does all that. What, abandon your husband when you're old and publicly humiliate him as if he were a dog?' Patriarchy holds that a woman's work is of less value compared to a man's ego. This business of asking for permission is over, the mother decides. By leaving her spouse and child, she is essentially rejecting society norms and prioritising her own happiness. Bhavana realises she had followed the same patterns in her marriage, constantly diminishing herself to keep her husband's feeling superior. [Rajan & Park \(2000\)](#)

Bhavana's mother gives a powerful explication of Luce Irigaray's *écriture's* Feminine, pointing out the differences between how men and women tell stories. Mother's version of the family legend emphasises patriarchal oppression, whereas father's version glosses over it. When her mother says 'this is what happens when you have too much pride in your traditions,' it's clear that the patriarchy is trying to do rid of anything that can cause discomfort. Not everything is appropriate for open discussion. Then you create a myth out of thin air. The load of mythologizing the ladies in Bhavana's family history must be lifted from their shoulders if she is to make her own path into the narrative and dig several generations of silence. Qabar encourages the reader to feel compassion and to let go of judgement. Bhavana, the

mother of a neurodiverse child, claims that the father's decision to forsake his family is due to his 'world's biggest disorder' of a lack of empathy. The narrative does not provide out easy answers. There is no such thing as a happily ever after or a flawless love story. There are no foolproof *Qabar* encourages the reader to feel compassion and to let go of judgement. The narrative does not arrive at any decisions either. There is only the effort to learn more about the world around us, which comes about when we let go of our pride, acknowledge past wrongs, and embrace our differences. [Sharma \(2022\)](#)

The author has masterfully woven a fictional tale that encapsulates the realities of modern times while narrating the story of Bhavana. *Qabar* highlights the themes of yearning and insecurities of a single mother, and the story's realism is its unique characteristic. The author has skilfully portrayed the complexities of human relationships and the struggles of individuals in their personal lives. [Wells \(2007\)](#)

4.3. MAGIC REALISM

Meera's writing uses magic realism to explore the unsettling truths that plague our world. She blends facts and fiction seamlessly, as seen in a hypothetical case where the Indian Supreme Court must decide whether to permit the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 2019. Meera questions the impartiality of India's legal system, which is often accused of favouring the wealthy. In contrast, Bhavana upholds the law and views herself as a champion of justice, insisting that evidence is necessary. In a conversation that critiques recent land conflict decisions, Bhavana questions Thangal about the public interest and the lack of documentation supporting his claim that the qabar is historically significant. Bhavana believes that the courts should be free from faith and emotion, but she discovers that the qabar is real in both the crumbling buildings and the memories of the people who live there. Meera's writing reminds us that history is more than just facts and figures, but also includes cultural norms and personal experiences. *Qabar* is a political story, but its translation is accessible to readers without glossaries or attempts to eliminate the source language. The novel's light-hearted framework is a refreshing contrast to the weighty subject matter. The text presents a fascinating story that blurs the lines between magic and reality. The author has chosen captivating themes that leave the readers bewildered with the enchanted levelheadedness of the story. Reading this story demands a suspension of disbelief from the readers, but the pragmatism of the enchanted reality presented in the story is what makes it truly beautiful. The protagonist of the story is a fiercely independent soul who does not conform to the societal norms and lives life on her own terms. She is a judge presiding over a demolition case of a petitioner's ancestor's grave, and the story revolves around her experiences during the case. [Zamora & Faris \(1995\)](#)

During the first hearing, the protagonist experiences a rainbow and a specific fragrance that puts her in a hypnotic state. She later wakes up in a hospital bed, having suffered from unconsciousness. The petitioner's name is Thangal, who is an architect or a worshipper of jinn, an illusionist, or something else entirely - the story leaves this open to interpretation. Thangal manages to perturb the protagonist through his illusions, leaving her uncertain and yearning for more. Thangal's enigmatic identity and his mastery of illusions feed into the protagonist's intrusive sense of desire, making her all the more curious about him. As the story progresses, the reader is left wondering about Thangal's intentions and motivations, making for a truly engrossing read. [Takolander & Langdon \(2017\)](#)

Throughout the novel, Bhavana's journey is not just about uncovering historical artifacts but also about self-discovery. As she unravels the mysteries of *Qabar*, she

confronts her own inner demons and fears. The challenges she faces test her resolve, making her question her beliefs and values. However, she remains resolute in her quest, driven by the desire to protect the past and learn from it. Bhavana's journey in *'Qabar'* is not just about finding a lost civilization but also about understanding the importance of preserving history and embracing the unknown with an open heart and mind. Her character growth and the lessons she learns make her a compelling and relatable protagonist, capturing the hearts of readers as they accompany her on this thrilling adventure. [Rekha & Manjula \(2022\)](#)

Women's experiences and dreams can often be limited by reality. Hence, Meera has created an imaginary world where this rare breed exists. As a man, Thangal respects and listens to women, he can and does read their minds, and he sends the scent of the Edward rose into their shared spaces. In *Qabar*, patriarchal men are depicted as weak links, insecure at the loss of privileges they were born into. Qabar's portrayal of educated Keralan women dispels the notion of liberal democracy and liberty. The narrative weaves together different storylines, such as the birth of the scholar Brahmin, the hidden death of the ancestor with occult powers, and the merging of two young divine girls, resembling vanishing twins. These parallel narratives work together to create a cohesive story. [Pollock & Subramaniam \(2016\)](#)

4.4. QABAR AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALLEGORY

The writer poses several questions to the reader in this piece. Could the family be represented as the grave, where a woman buries her aspirations and individuality after getting married? Is justice hindered due to a lack of evidence? Or is it our attitudes that we desire to preserve in coffins? The writer only provides subtle hints, leaving the reader to search for further inquiries. A perceptive reader will hear a call to transcend the mundane and discover the underlying questions. The answers may not be within our control. It is important to share a tale about the distinct form of self-punishment in Kerala as toxic masculinity affects every part of India. The intelligence of women and their ability to overcome such circumstances in small ways is particularly impactful. Both Bhavana and her mother were able to leave their past behind and start afresh. Bhavana's charm in relationships is fuelled by the respect she has not received in her personal life thus far. [Parashar \(2016\)](#)

The text, *Qabar*, highlights a couple of intriguing stories that explore the influence of circumstances on people's lives. In the first story, we learn about a Muslim man who is fighting to protect his ancestral land from desecration. With communal tensions on the rise, he expects the narrative to revolve around this issue. However, to his surprise, the judge presiding over his case, Bhavana, becomes obsessed with his personal character. The story is complex with many layers that have been intricately woven together, making it a compelling read. The narrative is speckled with parables that has been hidden in torrents of a sophisticated magical realism entrenched in djinns who can hypnotize and the mesmerized rainbows that inflicts a fainting impact. Embedded and seemingly hidden in unfolding the enactment of magic in the writings that was not articulated much, unspoken physical desires of women who walks out from unsettled marriages and who stands in a situation to have a choice of choosing between a wide sky to fly by spreading her wings or else towards having a peg to roost on. The suppressed sexual yearnings of women, the enforced domesticity which is inflicted on them persuade them to lead a life of toil, disrespect humiliation are all the themes that has been weaved into the narrative by the author Meera. [Mishra \(2013\)](#)

This art form of writing it in a most subtle way as each text unfolds it would work tirelessly towards casting a spell. Being a single mother who got separated

from the indecisive marriage despite of being successful in her career, yearns to be heard, seen also to be understood most importantly to find out the answers towards the lifetime questions that are to be answered has been crafted beautifully. So many conflicts of pain and agony and the various layers of masculinity and femininity, religious conviction that is relied on Hindus and Muslims has been explored in the narrative. So enchanting and alluring, haunting and induces profound emotions, in spite of its small size this narrative comprehends a vital politically aware and the societal commentary, an intricate affair of love, an understanding of feminism and most predominantly a voyage of the discovery of self. It raises various questions regarding justice, identity, law, and religion. [Katrak \(1989\)](#)

Petitioner does not seem to be an ordinary man, who is a sorcerer and illusionist, a person who hypnotize and the worshipper of jinn. He brings himself with the fragrance of Edward roses and snakes, creeping into the heart of Bhavna, stirring her soul with unsettled anxieties and yearnings and leaves her haunting with the menaces of uncertain ancestors and also the girls whose feet had never touched the ground. This inexplicable theme evolves into a usual theme in the unique landscape of Qabar. [Kapur \(2013\)](#)

Anyhow in the second hearing, Bhavna seems to be more controlled of her anthropological self and was in prodigious fortitude to discard the case as soon as possible. A critique of the contemporary nature of operation and its law; wherein the evidence is balanced amongst a elegant wealthy man and a meagre ill-dressed and uneducated person, Bhavna impulsively courtesies the former. Demand of the judge was the evidence of physical document, but the petitioner Thangal had nothing. Another question of questioning the identity of his ancestor, as the statement of the judge implies, does past exist only in papers, merely in the records that has been documented?

Without having the evidence, Petitioner Thangal states,

“Just because there isn't a document doesn't mean there is no qabar” [Meera \(2020\)](#).

The narrative deliberately focusses on folk, myths lore and the influence that has created, how our historical bequest distresses our present-day. It also encompasses subtle yet authoritative social commentary regarding the conflict between Hindu and Muslim.

“Once a huge mob strip you naked and look at your genitals to find out which side you are, no one to whom that has happened-whether you are a Hindu or a Muslim, stays a person” [Meera \(2020\)](#).

Meera draws attention to societal and political issues that have a negative impact on humanity as a whole. As mentioned earlier, while Qabar was written, the land dispute, Ayodhya/ Ram Janmabhumi and Babri Masjid was going on, and the verdict was to be made. Being skeptical of the impartial stand the supreme court might take, Meera pens down *Qabar*. There are a humane approach Meera takes when she reaches the last pages of the novella. Nothing is above genuine relationships, communal segregations play no part in defining love, Meera says. That is why it can be rightly called as a modern parable. *Qabar* digs deeply into the shifting sands of illusion and reality, it struggles to disinter the humanity that is being buried each day by decisive forces in contemporary India. *Qabar* is so humane that Thangal's absence made Bhavana complete, his perfume made her complete.

According to Meera, love is not about possessing someone, but about mutual absorption into each other's lives. [Islam \(2019\)](#)

5. CONCLUSION

K. R. Meera's novel '*Qabar*' is a literary masterpiece that showcases her exceptional talent for exploring human emotions and societal complexities in a thought-provoking manner. The novel's exploration of significant themes and socio-cultural context offers readers an engaging experience that lingers in their minds long after finishing the book. Meera's skilful writing style and her ability to weave intricate plots make this novel a must-read for anyone who enjoys thought-provoking literature. Overall, '*Qabar*' is a highly recommended book that is sure to leave a lasting impression on its readers.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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