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**Entertainification and Celebritization by The News Media  
in K.R Meera's *The Hangwoman***

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**Abstract:** Entertainification is a neologism combining the word entertain with the suffix -ification, which is used to denote the act or process of making or becoming something. It is thus used to describe the process of turning things which are normally not considered as entertainment, such as politics, crimes and judicial proceedings, academics, etc., into entertainment. Celebritization is the process of turning individuals, phenomena and ideas are into celebrities or adopting them into the world-view of celebrity culture and giving them its characteristics. Both of these are widespread phenomena seen in media, both social media and news media. Very often, the media acts as an amplifier of these phenomena, if not being the direct cause of them. The news media in particular, often covers events in sensationalist ways, deliberately turning events into real life events, actions and proceedings into entertainment to commodify the news, in order to increase public interest and therefore, T.V ratings, turning the events they cover into public spectacles. It also often results in private individuals being turned into celebrities, turning them famous, regardless of whether they want to be or not. K.R Meera's *Hangwoman* portrays and satirises this in a clear manner, where Chetna Mullick, who is supposed to be the first ever female hangwoman in Independent India according to the novel, is thrust into the limelight along with the profession she is about to inherit from her father. Her life is turned into media entertainment and drama, while also celebritizing her and capital punishment itself. The paper seeks to examine how these phenomena are portrayed and how they interact with each other in *Hangwoman*.

**Keywords:** *Entertainification, Celebritization, News Media, Commodification, Sensationalism, Spectacle*

The protagonist of *Hangwoman* is Chetna Mullick, a young woman from a family of executioners. Her family is quite poor, and her father Grddha Mullick is an old man who served as an executioner for many years. Her brother's limbs were hacked away by the father of Amartya Ghosh, a man Grddha Mullick had hanged. Her brother didn't want to inherit the family profession and had arguments with his father against it. Since he was disabled by the attack on him, he couldn't take up that profession either way. A criminal named Jatindranath Banerjee was sentenced to death by hanging and his mercy petition was rejected, ensuring his death. Grddha Mullick was called upon by the state to conduct the hanging. However, he refused, citing that the government had failed to keep its promises and take care of his family, its promises of a government job for his children, which was given to him in writing, when the government decided to execute Jabbar Singh, forgotten after his son Ramdev Mullick was attacked and seriously injured for the rest of his life. He therefore argued that he would take up the task of hanging only if his daughter gets a government job. He said this while being interviewed on the topic by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, a reporter for the CNC, a prominent news channel. This is an early example of the media's tendency to turn everything into sensationalism and entertainment being portrayed in the novel. The media turns the personal pains and experiences of others into a commodity to be enjoyed by others. It turns it all into a spectacle, a source of entertainment. As a result, real events, real activities and people are entertainified, in order to get more people to watch news channels and to boost the ratings. The television rating point or TRP, which is a measure of how many people watched a television program, is all important to the news channels who makes sure to entertainify everything as much as possible to gain the attention of the people.

It is Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, who suggested to Grddha Mullick that instead of simply asking for a government job for his daughter, he could ask for his job to be given to his daughter. Grddha Mullick had not thought of that until Sanjeev Kumar Mitra had said that and was surprised, saying that whether she can have his job or not, is up to the government. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra made sure to ensure that this report was very significant in his channel. It is clear that Sanjeev Kumar Mitra knew the impact of something like this if it were to happen. He likely knew very well that the idea of the first hangwoman in independent India, was far too news worthy, far too significant of a story, which can be fed to the masses and sensationalised to grab their attention. Which is why he decided to suggest something like that to Grddha Mullick. This news report by Sanjeev Kumar Mitra was followed by his coverage of Pallav Dasgupta, the law minister, who said that while he was not against the children of hangmen inheriting the profession of their father, he was against the demand by Grddha Mullick that his job be handed over to his daughter, terming it unacceptable. The news report had the minister's face on video, with him saying that this was a profession which was not suitable for women and that it required a lot of strength of mind and body. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra questioned in return whether the minister believed

that women lacked in strength of mind and body, which the minister tried to argue against. This helped Sanjeev Kumar Mitra turn the report from the matter of an execution and children inheriting the profession of their fathers, to one of women empowerment and women's rights, quickly adopting feminist talking points for his own use. This shows the intelligence and cunning of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, his ability to manipulate others for his own goals. He and his channel proceeds to turn it into a topic of debate on their channel's debate and discussion program. He also says in his report that the viewers can also take part in the live discussion on the topic, being able to call into the studio during the debates to voice their opinions.

This is the start of the media frenzy which turned Chetna, her family as well as the profession of execution itself, with its various methods of tying nooses, calculating rope length based on the height and weight of the convict, etc., itself into entertainment in prime-time television. Chetna and her family are turned into media celebrities over night or in a very short amount of time. The profession of executioners or hanging people itself is turned into a celebrity in a way, creating a lot of interest and among the general public due to the perverse media coverage, which involved interviews with Chetna and Mr Grddha. This involved Mr Grddha being asked to demonstrate on AVA news, the rival news network of CNC, being asked to demonstrate tying a noose and their TRP being boosted as a result of Grddha Mullick doing the same. As a result, their TRP became higher than CNC's, which was higher than AVA's until then. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra had asked Chetna whether she could do the same on CNC on the same day, but she had refused. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra was upset at being overtaken by AVA and tried to reprimand Chetna the next day, saying that they could have beaten AVA's TRP if only Chetna had been more cooperative. Chetna replied by telling them the story of her trying to imitate her father who was demonstrating to journalists years ago, how to tie a noose, by tying a noose and trying it on her three-year-old neighbour, making it clear that she wouldn't do it as she was afraid of others, especially children trying to imitate her and putting themselves in danger. Harish Nath, the director of programmes at CNC, and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, were not pleased by this.

This is a clear example of how the media executives and many reporters like Sanjeev Kumar Mitra only care about the ratings of their channels and programs and not the general well being of others and they wanted the genuine experiences and knowledge of others only for their value in getting an audience in the general public who would pay close attention transfixed, which they wanted to exploit in their cynical manner, tuning all of it into an entertainment. They make use of the anecdotes and life stories of Chetna, her father, her uncle and family members of the condemned and the previously executed to bring attention to their program, engaging in a form of peacocking. They even gave coverage to her brother, plastering his images in their news reports for everyone to see. This is an example of the media turning everything into a spectacle, which is far too common with the media in

real life as well. The life of Chetna and her family is made public, celebritizing them in the public eye and making them well known throughout the country. It can also be seen and understood that Chetna and her family goes along with it as they were in need of the job. They were pragmatic in their approach to collaborating with the news channels

The same could be said for Kokila, the wife of Jatindranath Banerjee, the criminal condemned to death. She was brought into the studio to talk with and debate with Chetna on whether Jatindranath's life should be spared, with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra being the moderator. This was completely unexpected to Chetna, who was floored. She was extremely uncomfortable with this. Kokila Banerjee's face was impassive and hard as stone. But when Sanjeev Kumar Mitra asked Kokila Banerjee about her husband's impending execution, which was going to take place in just ten days, what she thought about her becoming a widow, she responded with a rasping sob, which mad Chetna more uncomfortable. Sanjeev Kumar Mitra pretended to be sad, but the end of it all, Chetna saw him counting out four or five hundred-rupee notes to Mrs Kokila. He had done his best to make the entire program look sad, but also exciting, bringing a contrast between the feminine power of Chetna and the one who must suffer the result of Chetna doing her job, asking the question whether Jatindranath Banerjee should be spared and doing a poll, but it's clear that all of it was deliberate from how he handed Kokila Banerjee the money and how she left without even removing her makeup. Harish Nath was ecstatic and congratulated Sanjeev Kumar on how their TRP climbed five points due to his efforts, to which Sanjeev Kumar Mitra replied gleefully that he had told Kokila in advance to weep instead of just talking a lot in the program, which made Chetna want to cry. It is another clear example of the cynicism of the two individuals.

Chetna saw Kokila with her brother-in-law, it was clear that they were poor. When Kokila Banerjee saw and turned Chetna, her face was filled with anger, but on seeing the expression in her eyes, it softened. She was crying for real there and tried to hide her tears and smiled. This shows that Sanjeev Kumar was taking advantage of people like them for the sake of ratings. This was also seen in the case of Protima Ghost, the mother of Rameshchandra Ghosh, who was the last convict hanged before Jatindranath Banerjee. She was deeply upset about the injustices meted out to her family, the execution of her son and the life imprisonment of her husband. At the end of the show, when Chetna, Protima, Sanjeev Kumar and Harish Nath came out, Harish Nath wrinkled his nose at Protima, remarking that she stank of cow dung. While it was true that she smelled faintly of cow dung, this insult enraged Protima who proceeded to shut up Harish Nath. This shows the lack of empathy of the people involved in the media industry. The process of using real life experiences and stories of people being turned into entertainment in the media for the mass consumption by the public is clearly showcased by such actions. There are numerous dialogues by Harish Nath and Sanjeev Kumar of

similar nature, showcasing their cynical approach of making use of real accounts for the sake of sensationalism. The entertainification and celebritization of events, people and an entire line of work, one which is not a light hearted matter, is an example of this. Sensationalism in them media exists in the story, so that everything can be turned into a spectacle to grab the attention of the people. Things have to be turned into entertainment and people and ideas made popular for this purpose.

K.R Meera deploys these processes in her novel as a clear critique and satire on the prevailing media culture in India. The novel has clear humorous moments, even though dark and this is deliberate, as a part of satire. She criticises the patriarchal nature of the society as well as the tendency by the media to turn everything into a commodity to be capitalised and marketed, even deaths. In the novel, it is mentioned that the death penalty is just the delivery of justice, but also the imprint of power. But we can see that the media too has power, the power to affect the minds of those watching it. In the novel, Harish Nath and Sanjeev Kumar makes Chetna and her family and others compliant to this power, helping it for their own benefit out of pragmatism. Chetna later resists this, at the end of the novel. She turns away from what the media, obsessed with the TRPs, wanted her to be. While she was a subject earlier, as described by the theories of Foucault (disciplinary regimes and institutions create willing subjects out of individuals, especially seen in prison systems to bring back deviant individuals to the mainstream), a person who helped the media in their objective to make everything a spectacle, she later broke free of this power the media exerted on her. The novel showcases that many of the social justice causes and narratives of empowerment upheld and defended by the media are actually empty and cynical methods to boost TRPs. The media doesn't really care about these causes; just how much noise they can make and hold the attention of people by making it interesting. Events like the mock hanging in the studio after the real hanging shows the ugly truth about how the real and heavy matter of executions is treated by the news channels and its staff and executives. Biswajit Ray, the owner of the channel congratulated his staff members on the highly successful coverage of Jatindranath's case, saying that his team deserved full credit for introducing Chetna to the channel and the people. Harish Nath then tells Chetna that she had turned into a phenomenon, a role model for India. He enunciated this point by informing her and everyone there that eleven children had played hangman the day before and died, which shocked and horrified Chetna. But he casually proceeded to say that this meant Chetna had become famous and that the hanging had left a strong impression in the minds of numerous people. This shows the callous disregard for others and the lack of empathy present in him as well as others. There is a lack of morality and moral concerns, even remorse or just basic regret. He also said that the death toll may go up to fourteen.

The long Grddha Mullick legacy of being executioners from the time of the Nanda Kings of Bengal, is turned into entertainment, their history mixed with sensationalism for the media to sell the public, as a spectacle. The commodification of news we see in the novel, where news is turned into entertainment, is a real-world phenomenon, one which the author criticizes through satire. The media coverage personalises Chetna and her family. The history of the family becomes public, all their experiences of pain, suffering, pride, happiness, etc., their long history, became commodified by the media. Chetna is turned into a symbol of women's empowerment, into a celebrity while the role of the executioner is trivialised for the sake of ratings. She is turned into an icon of female empowerment while also being exploited by the masterminds at CNC. Sanjeev Kumar turns the interviews with Chetna, with whom he had signed a contract on CNC to gain exclusivity in their access to her. These interviews were turned into massive spectacles for everyone to watch and even interact with though calls to the studio and expressing their opinions.

Chetna takes up a job that was previously performed only by the men of the family except for a single woman centuries ago. This is turned into a revolutionary act that breaks barriers for women, but is essentially commodified. Judith Butler states that gender is performative. Hence, as an executioner, Chetna is performing as a member of the masculine gender. She is supposedly empowered while turned into a subject of the public gaze. The institutions of the state, the courts, prison and execution systems turns her into a controlled, normalized subject who is obedient to the system, which she rejects later. The power structures of the state, media, society and family come together as carceral or punitive power, patriarchal order, paternal control and knowledge production come together to subject the protagonist to the collective will of all. This collective will or simply being part of the structure of the society, being part of its collective is rebelled against by Chetna, echoing Foucault's notion that power produces resistance. She does it by subverting the mock hanging demonstration to take place in the CNC studio. The channel had created a noose and gallows for this mock hanging. It was supposed to be watched like a sports event for the entertainment of the people. Chetna rejects demonstrating the noose on Karthik Banerjee, the brother of Jatindranath, saying that the rope is not suitable for him and that it instead fits Sanjeev Kumar better. She then chokes him with the noose on air before releasing him, finding true liberation and empowerment. This did ironically, have entertainment value, boosting the ratings.

The concept of hyperreality by Baudrillard states that signs and symbols created to stand in for reality starts brings confused for consensus reality. The way the mock execution replaces the real execution in the eyes of the public is an example of this. The signs and symbols such as the televised debates and programs replace the truth of the act of hanging to be replaced in the minds of the public. Lived experience is replaced by the representation by the media. The debates, the stories and history of

Chetna's family, their lived experiences, their techniques of the profession, etc are all a source of entertainment while replacing the reality of it all. This is also seen when feminist organisations backed Chetna and defended her right to be a hangwoman, not really understanding the broader context, falling for the rhetoric, the outward appearances while failing to grasp the truth behind it all.

As a critique of the media industry, the novel shines the most. In the post media liberalisation era of India, there was a surge in the number of private news media channels. The abundance of these news media channels also drastically increased sensationalism in the news media domain, increasing the commodification of news events and sensationalism as they proliferated, turning all of it into a spectacle. The novel is also sceptical of the effectiveness of the capital punishment as it notes some of the cases of injustices meted out to those who didn't deserve it. The concept of biopolitics or state control of people's bodies, their lives and deaths is ever present in the novel, but it mostly escape being turned into a spectacle as the hanging of the convict is not shown in the media and there were no interviews of him despite the media frenzy surrounding the punishment itself. Much of the rest is however turned into entertainment. Justice and death are removed from truly serious and grave events and turned into entertainment and the executioner and her family turned into celebrities. The article called *celebritization of society and culture* by Olivier Driessens that becoming a celebrity is a source of social capital that can help one gain power. It gets one visibility, recognition, media attention and public influence, which can get one political influence, wealth and cultural authority. Chetna had the potential to gain all of these things for herself, but she walked away, not just as an act of resistance, but also because she was nauseated by it all. She became famous and well known through the media, being hailed as a role model, with children imitating her and ending up killing themselves, which made clear from the very beginning that she absolutely did not want to happen, due to her own childhood experience on the matter. If she had continued to play the game, she could have become rich, with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra even informing her that both the CPM and Congress were going to invite her to join politics. She abandoned it all.

We see how in the novel, the media increasingly shapes social reality, influencing the opinions of the people and society at large, creating mixed opinions in the beginning, but leading it all in the direction of women empowerment. Media was hiding the blunt truth behind their own constructed or created reality. The real personality of the people who were popularised by the media were hid behind the façade created by the media, constructing the social reality. While the private lives of these individuals were turned into a spectacle, the deeper, inner truth about them continued to be hidden. The sensationalism and the spectacle only hid the truth in the end. We see the media talking about the emotions, personal life and family of Chetna instead of truly getting to know her and what she truly believes in. She doesn't say her personal opinions without a filter. The media, instead of talking about

the institutions like prisons and the use of capital punishment, focuses on the personality of Chetna, creating a public personality. This in turn enables commodification or a marketable commodity which the public consume through news media. Thus, celebrification or the process of turning an individual into a celebrity and the closely related celebritization, the process by which what is called celebrity logic spreads across society, as evidenced by both the judicial system and the process of hanging the convict turns into a spectacle, are both very important themes found in the novel. The methods of creating nooses and selecting rope lengths, trade secrets of the art of execution, becomes known to the public and becomes famous, being celebritized.

From the perspective of Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle, the novel exemplifies how representation replaces reality, with the constructed reality of the media superseding actual reality. Society thus consumes this constructed reality or façade as entertainment. Manipulating the audience through emotions and exciting them become the goal of it all. People do not question what they are shown. According to Debord, spectacle supports systems of power, which is parallel to Foucault's theories on punishment, where the power of the sovereign is maintained through exerting it on the body of the criminal publicly, creating a spectacle. This very like what is shown in the novel, where all of the procedures are turned into a spectacle. *Amusing ourselves to death* by Neil Postman is a major work of media criticism which offers more information on the things depicted in the novel. In it, he explains that mass media has turned public discourse of the serious kind into entertainment. According to him, the information which a medium makes available to the public is shaped by it. Since television operates in a visual medium, prefers brevity, speed, drama, emotions, excitement, etc and therefore simplifies complex issues. As a result, news becomes a form of entertainment. Commodification and sensationalism replace logical analysis. Postman also believes that television encourages short attention spans and fragmented thinking as a result, due to lack of deep engagement and rapid changes on screen, much like coverage of elections on Indian media. As a result of all of these, everything becomes a spectacle, a performance and entertainment. Focus turns to emotional manipulation and commercial exploitation with dramatic narration and audio-visual effects added in for extra efforts. The concept of hyperreality introduced *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudillard also works well in explaining the events of the novels, with the signs and symbols replacing consensual reality.

In conclusion, in *Hangwoman*, K.R Meera depicts the effects of entertainification and celebritization of even such things like family history and traditions, female empowerment and the death penalty and the grief of others. *Hangwoman* all in all is a coming-of-age novel which depicts a young woman finding freedom, escaping being categorised by power and social structures, however, it is to be noted that the structures still persist after it.

All the media coverage leads to hyperrealism and the commodification of everything, turning all the events and proceedings into a spectacle, as well as popularising all of it amongst the wider populace, giving it a celebrity like treatment. All of it is given the characteristics of celebrity culture or celebritized. The novel satirises this and warns against this, exposing the follies of news media and asking us to examine and question the type of content we consume in the news media, which is also applicable to social media. Such entertainification and celebritization has consequences. The depiction for true crime series in media is often an example of this unhealthy manner of reporting within, with things like suspenseful music and other and visual and auditory effects point to this. The novel depicts and satirises all of this accurately and wants the reader to examine all of it rationally. Celebritization of the profession being an executioner, celebrification of the people involved, as well as the entertainification of the life, history, grief, processes, etc. shown in the novel can be applicable to any profession, not just the profession of an executioner. It is also seen a great deal in politics, where politicians are turned into celebrities and politics is celebritized. Politics has also been turned into a source of entertainment, as exemplified by the words and action of the US president Donald Trump after he entered politics. It is obvious that any subject can be turned into entertainment by media if there is sufficient potential for drama and sensationalism in it. Thus, the novel is a warning to the readers to tread carefully when viewing media spectacle and not take them at face value.

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