

THE ABSENT FATHER AND THE BURDEN OF A MOTHER: SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN K. R. MEERA'S *QABAR*

Subhasnata Mohanta,
NIT Durgapur, India & Adamas University, India
Sutanuka Banerjee
NIT, Durgapur, India

Abstract: *The paper examines the ways in which K. R. Meera's novella Qabar critiques patriarchal family structures by emphasising how women often bear disproportionate burdens of motherhood, particularly in the absence of a father figure. The novella, originally written in Malayalam and translated into English by Nisha Sushan, explores how women are expected to perform emotional, material and social responsibilities associated with childcare, while men can easily disengage from the process after the marital separation. Pramod's absence in parenting highlights the systematic privileges granted to fathers by the patriarchal structure. Bhavana's struggle to raise her neurodivergent son intersects and merges with her professional challenges, reflecting societal expectations that equate womanhood with maternal sacrifice. The narrative reveals single motherhood as a paradox of autonomy and subjugation. By situating Meera's novella within the discourse of gendered labour and parenting, this paper critiques family structure by showing how the absence of a father intensifies the single mother's struggles and offers a space to assert her agency.*

Keywords: *single motherhood; absent father; patriarchy; maternal burdens.*

Introduction

Historically, in every patriarchal society, women have always been disproportionately burdened, especially in the realm of parenting. While Feminist scholars across the world have vehemently critiqued the unequal distribution of domestic and emotional labour, the experience of single mothers – who shoulder financial and caregiving responsibilities- remains crucial to understanding the intersection of gender, labour and autonomy. Contemporary Indian feminist author K. R. Meera's seminal work *Qabar* (2021), which is originally published in Malayalam and later translated into English by Nisha Susan, offers a critical analysis of these issues through the lens of the protagonist, Bhavana's life who struggles to raise her neurodivergent son Advaith, after getting divorced from her husband, Pramod. The narrative highlights how patriarchal framework of the family privileges men to disassociate themselves from parenting responsibilities. At the same time, women are expected to sacrifice personal and professional goals in the name of the duties of motherhood. Bhavana's situation mirrors those of her mother's, reinforcing the traditional gendered expectations despite women's increasing educational and financial stability. *Qabar* also situates motherhood

and the absence of a father figure at a paradoxical space – both a site of subjugation and a space for potential assertion of agency. Bhavana's divorce indicates a rejection of patriarchal control, yet her journey as a single mother underscores the systematic oppression that reinforces women's reliance on family spaces. By situating Meera's novella within the discourse of gendered labour and parenting, this paper offers a critique of patriarchal family structure by showing how the absence of a father figure intensifies the single mother's struggles amid societal expectations while also offering a space to assert her own agency.

K. R. Meera is a well-known journalist and writer from Kerala who speaks out of discrimination against women. She has been critically appreciated for her powerful engagement with women's experiences, power relations in society, and patriarchy. All her writings, originally written in Malayalam and widely translated into English, have always been praised for their unique narrative strategies, psychological depths and feminist concerns. In J. Devika's words,

K. R. Meera's fiction exemplifies a new kind of feminist writing in Malayalam that is unapologetically intense, emotionally raw, and politically sharp. Her women characters are not just resisting patriarchy—they are rewriting the very terms of existence (Devika 150)

Her novels, such as *Hangwoman* (2015), *The Gospel of Yudas* (2016), *The Poison of Love* (2017), and her short story collection, *The Angels Beauty Spots* (2019), have established her as one of the powerful voice in the literary landscape of contemporary India, with *Hangwoman* being considered as a path breaking feminist text for which she has received prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 and she has also awarded with Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, earlier in 2009. Her increasing global recognition also highlights the universal appeal in her narrative style. Her novella *Qabar* (2021) is a powerful exploration of gender, identity and power within the confinement of a patriarchal social structure. The narrative of the novella revolves around the professional as well as personal journey of Bhavana Sacchidanandan, an Additional District Judge and a single mother, as she negotiates the crucial intersection of law, religion and personal history while handling a legal case on the demolition of a qabar (grave) belonging to the petitioner, Kaakkasseri Khayaluddin Thangal's ancestors. The story employs the elements of magic realism and social criticism to offer a nuanced portrayal of single motherhood in a patriarchal family system. This narrative strategy functions as a metaphorical instrument that gives Bhavana a way to confront her traumas and internalised patriarchal judgement she has kept suppressed for a long time. In a world where her identity is constantly conflicted with her roles as judge, single mother and ex-wife, magic realism grants her a liminal space where she can question these imposed notions. By the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality

question deep-rooted cultural beliefs and shows the hidden struggles that single women often face. Bhavana's journey as a divorced woman and a single mother becomes a space of struggle and self-assertion, highlighting how societal frameworks continue to shape women's identity even beyond the institution of marriage. The story of *Qabar* revolves around Bhavana's emotional and psychological journey as she navigates motherhood following her divorce and battles both real and symbolic imprisonment. Bhavana's continuous quest for freedom acts as a driving force behind all her actions. The narrative explores the emotional journey of Bhavana, who is constantly tormented between the traumas of divorce while struggling to accept her newly constructed identity as a single mother and the absence of a father figure. Her struggle constitutes the central theme of the novella. This essay critically explores the journeys of Bhavana in the absence of father figures while negotiating their respective motherhood.

Motherhood in *Qabar* is deeply intertwined with patriarchy, marriage, and single womanhood. Bhavana's experiences highlight the cultural expectation that women must bear the primary responsibility of child-rearing, even when the father is absent. Her ex-husband, Pramod, refrain himself from emotional and financial responsibilities of parenthood, leaving Bhavana to shoulder everything single handedly. This reflects the traditional unequal distribution of domestic labour in the family, where fatherhood has traditionally been associated with authority rather than active participation in the parenting process. As Bhavana tries to balance her domestic and professional responsibilities, she finds herself caged with the burdens of single parenting reiterating the notion that women's identities are often tied to their maternal roles. The novella criticises the patriarchal family structure by narrating how her husband, Pramod's absence doubles her struggle and at the same time offers a space to assert her individuality. While Bhavana's choice to separate from her husband suggests independence, her journey as a mother remains shaped by deeply ingrained gendered notions. Through *Qabar*, Meera challenges the conventional idea of parenting, laying bare the inequalities in familial roles and highlighting how the absence of a father figure intensifies the responsibility of a mother and at the same time grants her space to assert her identity.

Theorising Gendered Labour in Parenting: The Absent Father and the Maternal Burden

Indian society is highly patriarchal, which Feminist scholars, such as Sylvia Walby (1990), conceptualise as a system of structures and practices that institutionalise male dominance, marginalising women within social, economic, and cultural spheres. Patriarchal nature of Indian society has historically defined gender roles, particularly in the arena of parenting and

domestic labour, reinforcing what Walby (1990) defines as a system of “private patriarchy”. Patriarchy controls the public as well as the private and major social institutions, such as family and marriage where women are oppressed and controlled by some individual patriarchs (Walby, 1990). Within this framework, the traditional Indian household acts as a significant site where gendered labour hierarchies are prevalent. In this system, fathers serve as the heads of the entire family. Fathers in these families are historically in charge of ensuring the well-being of the household. This position in the family, in turn, gives fathers authority over their families. In such a patriarchal structure, the father is regarded as the

Heads of the households, bread-winners, owners and managers of property, and active in politics, religion, business and the professions. Women, on the other hand, are expected and trained to bear and look after the children, to nurse the infirm and the old, do all housework and so on. (Bhasin 7)

Within this framework, the father figure is often viewed as a center of authority providing economic security while refraining from day-to-day caregiving. According to traditional Indian beliefs, a father should be a child’s provider, guardian, educator, and moral guide, while the everyday labour of raising children—both physical and emotional—falls disproportionately upon the mothers. This ideology reflects what Heidi Hartmann (1981) describes as a “patriarchal mode of production,” where the reproductive quality of women has been undergone systematic exploitation to perpetuate male dominance. Hartmann argued that this sex-ordered division of labour was the foundation of women's present position in society. According to Hartmann, a patriarchal system was put in place where men were in charge of the labour of the family’s women and children, and that men acquired the skills in the process of control and hierarchical organisation. She further argues:

The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s control over women’s labor power. Men maintain this control by excluding women from access to some essential productive resources (in capitalist societies, for example, jobs that pay living wages) and by restricting women's sexuality.

(Hartmann 15)

Feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Sara Ruddick (1989) have described motherhood as not merely a biological function but a socially constructed phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural as well as economic sphere of the society. Chodorow (1978), through a psychoanalytic framework, argues that the gendered division of parenting arises from the early socialisation of children, wherein mothers become the primary attachment figures while fathers remain emotionally detached. She identifies mothering

as an ongoing identity, activity, and psychic constellation. Once you are a mother, it goes throughout your life and it never stops, even if your children are no longer alive. The gerund form, mothering, indicates the active nature (both intrapsychic and in the world) of being a mother, as well as a girl's orientation to becoming a mother and the maternal identity that she brings from her internal object-relational location as daughter. (Chodorow 56)

This aligns with Jasodhara Bagchi's (2017) observations, where she describes motherhood is one of the most significant phenomena constructed within the rubric of patriarchy and at the same time, has been absorbed as an essential component of womanhood (Bagchi 42). It also reiterates Sudhir Kakar's (1981) argument on Indian family system where fatherhood is only associated with earning livelihood. The absence of father in the everyday process of parenting is structurally produced through the patriarchal social norm that equate masculinity with breadwinning rather caregiving (Kakar 13). The construction of motherhood as an epitome of self-sacrifice is deeply rooted in socio cultural tradition of India and it is framed by centuries old Brahminical patriarchal tradition. The mother iconography has its origins in sociocultural and popular religious traditions. Numerous ancient writings, like the *Dharmasastras* and *Stridharmapaddhati*, promoted marriage and childbirth as women's essential priorities. As Amrita Nandy (2017) argues, these constructs have accumulated over time, shaping Indian maternal identity not as a singular moment of transformation but as a slow sedimentation of political and cultural discourses (Nandy 54).

This structure simultaneously constructs the concept of motherhood as a site of psychological labour, duty and sacrifice:

...such ideal women portrayed in literature, have moulded Indian womanhood to a new type which has been held as glory of Hindu culture for more than a thousand years... it cannot be denied that there is an element of nobility in the sacrifice and self-abnegation of Indian woman, and it is impossible to withhold the due need of praise, even admiration, from that patient and suffering class of humanity. (Majumdar 122)

In light of these theoretical perspectives, the absent father in Indian households is not merely a social phenomenon but a structural necessity of patriarchal capitalism, one that ensures the continued subjugation of women's labour within the domestic sphere. Despite the increasing presence of women in professional domains, their identities remain tied to maternal responsibilities, reflecting the resilience of gendered labour hierarchies. And this framework subjugates single mothers doubly as they need to undertake the caregiving as well as financial responsibilities. Unlike women in traditional family sphere, single mothers navigate a patriarchal system that burdens them for the absence of a male provider while simultaneously considering them responsible for the entire process of child rearing. As social theorist Rhacel Salazar Parreñas

(2001) argues in the context of migrant mothers, the feminisation of domestic responsibilities does not equate to female empowerment but instead reinforces the precarious position of women within capitalist-patriarchal economies. In the Indian context, where motherhood is celebrated, single mothers are often stigmatised for their deviation from the normative family structure (20). This aligns with Nandini Ghosh's (2016) argument that single mothers, particularly widows and divorcees, are marginalised through both economic precarity and cultural narratives that frame them as incomplete without male guardianship. Thus, while motherhood is culturally exalted, single mothers experience an intensified form of gendered oppression, demonstrating how patriarchy adapts to new social realities while maintaining control over women's labour and autonomy (5).

The Gendered Division of Parenting: Pramod's Privilege and Bhavana's Burden

Reiterating Max Weber's (1947) concept, Sylvia Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as "a system of government in which men rules societies through their positions of head of the household" (214). Such framework advantages men a "patriarchal dividend" that allows them to detach themselves from the process of child-rearing without facing significant social consequences. In contrast, mothers like Bhavana bear all the responsibilities of parenthood, navigating both public and private spheres while managing domestic labour. Bhavana's experience in the patriarchal society illustrates Walby's understanding on "private patriarchy" where the structure of traditional family system ensures male authority and women's burden in the process of caregiving: "Women's responsibility for unpaid domestic labour, including childcare and elder care, is a central mechanism through which patriarchy is maintained in the private sphere" (Walby 97). Pramod's disengagement from the entire journey of parenting shows how fathers are granted the privilege of detachment in the patriarchal society: "The day the doctor said Advaith might have ADHD, Pramod has screamed "I never again want to see this cursed little animal who never gives us a moment's peace" (Meera 34). His lack of involvement in Advaith's upbringing also highlights how patriarchal division of labour socially permits men to abandon their parental duties, whereas women are expected to act as the primary caregivers regardless of their personal and professional engagements. Bhavana's position as a single mother after her divorce is exacerbated by the social expectation that she will perform the responsibilities of the breadwinner as well as fulfil all aspects of his emotional development. Pramod, on the other hand, faces no social consequences for his neglect. These contradicting differences in expectation underscore how the institution of family is strategically structured to serve male interests, reinforcing the patriarchal ideology that a woman's primary

role in society is that of a wife and a mother. Uma Chakravarty's (2003) understanding on patriarchal division of labour supports this argument:

Patriarchy is not just a set of social practices but also an ideology that ensures women's subordinated position in every realm of public and private life. It is an ideology that also links women's unpaid domestic labour to the reproduction of the labour force in the public sphere. (10)

The absence of a father figure in a child's life places a significant psychological burden on the mother, subjecting her to navigate or caregiving responsibilities as well as the psychological impact of single parenthood. Nancy Chodorow (1978) opines that motherhood is more than just a biological process; it is a socially constructed phenomenon deeply embedded in cultural expectations (7). In such a scenario, Bhavna's role as a single mother is dictated by a patriarchal narrative that associates womanhood and motherhood with self-sacrifice. While raising a child, she is culturally expected to act as an embodiment of resilience, patience and unconditional love regardless of her social position. Pramod's constant absence intensifies Bhavna's struggle as she has always been expected to compensate for the void created by that absence. Bhavna says:

As soon as I realised I was going to be a single parent for the rest of my life, I had written the exam for District Judge selection. I had one reason and one reason only. As a judge I would be allotted two office assistants. I'd have one by my side all the time. (Meera 32)

Bhavna's decision to pursue a judicial career highlights how a desire for professional stability becomes a need for survival besides being a professional ambition. Her reliance on office assistance reflects her desperate attempt to fill the absence created by Pramod. Meera's novella does not portray Bhavna as a passive victim, as it simultaneously depicts the paradox of single motherhood as a site of subjugation and potential agency. While she struggles under the burden of immense societal expectations, her independent existence as a single mother also offers her a space to redefine her maternal identity beyond the threshold of marriage. Her journey of motherhood expands to navigate societal prejudices, workplace pressures and stigma associated with being a divorced woman and single mother.

In addition to emotional and caregiving responsibilities, Bhavna's financial burden highlights the economic disparities pervaded in patriarchal societies. Heidi Hartman (1981) observes the "patriarchal mode of production" as a system in which a woman's labour is systematically ignored to maintain male dominance:

It is crucial that the relation of men's interdependence to their ability to dominate women be examined in historical societies. It is crucial that the hierarchy among men, and their differential access to patriarchal benefits, be

examined. Surely, class, race, nationality, and even marital status and sexual orientation, as well as the obvious age, come into play here. And women of different class, race, national, marital status, or sexual orientation groups are subjected to different degrees of patriarchal power. Women may themselves exercise class, race, or national power, or even patriarchal power (through their family connections) over men lower in the patriarchal hierarchy than their own male kin. (Hartman 14)

In the introduction to *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (1989) Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid also critically explored how patriarchal systems intertwine with political economy, law, religion, and culture. They argue that the reconstitution of patriarchies in Indian society is deeply influenced by these factors, leading to complex women's experiences across different social strata (Sangari, Vaid 22). This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how economic differences and social order perpetuate gender inequalities, resonating with discussions on the financial and societal challenges faced by women like Bhavana in patriarchal societies. Bhavana's financial struggles are manifested by the gendered parenting expectations. As a single mother she is always expected to provide for her son's financial, educational and emotional requirements without receiving any financial support from her husband. The novella, very subtly points out the structural inequality while discussing how Bhavana's professional aspirations are constantly undermined by the demands of single motherhood. In Nivedita Menon's words:

The central contradiction in women's lives is the collision between the demand for women to be free and equal on the one hand, and the unchanging demand that they should remain responsible for reproduction, family care, and emotional labour on the other. (24)

While Pramod gets a scope to pursue his career without constraints, Bhavana is expected to balance her professional life with her full-time responsibilities of single motherhood. This disparity is systematically structured to prevent women from achieving economic independence by not recognising their contribution in domestic as well as professional spheres. Uma Chakravarti also observes a similar tendency:

The material and ideological subordination of women has been legitimized and naturalized through the ideological framework of patriarchy... Women's labour in the household and in the reproductive sphere is naturalised as their primary responsibility, rendering their contributions to the economy and society invisible and undervalued. (19)

Indian society constantly ostracises or stigmatises single mothers, often portraying them as inferior and incomplete without male associations. Nandini Ghosh (2016) observes how single mothers, especially those who are

divorced, are often portrayed in a paradoxical position – on the one hand, they are constantly celebrated for their resilience and marginalised for their deviating from traditional family structure. While Bhavana is often appreciated for raising her child alone, at the same time, she remains subject to constant criticism. Her roles as a single mother and her womanhood have been repeatedly undermined in both private and public spheres. Before Advaith's birth, when medical tests advised treatment for Pramod, he tries to shift the blame on Bhavana by questioning her fertility. Even after giving birth, he also has tried to make her responsible for the neurotic disorder in their son Advaith, as he says, “it is all your fault – your body is weak” (Meera 43). This abusive behaviour of Pramod indicates how societal notions are often weaponised in domestic or intimate spaces. Despite her professional success as a District Judge, Bhavana has often faced sheer gender discrimination, as once a petitioner remarks, “You may be a judge, but you are still a woman, aren't you? Just a woman.” (Meera 15). Together, these incidents demonstrate how Bhavana is both praised and criticized—appreciated for her self-reliance but continually reminded of the patriarchal restrictions placed on her identity as a mother and a woman. Her single status is not viewed as a site of agency but as an unfortunate event of life, reinforcing the traditional patriarchal notion that a woman's primary identity is tied with her marital responsibilities. Pramod's absence offers Bhavana a sense of autonomy, yet social prejudices structurally constrain this autonomy. The narrative of *Qabar* depicts how Bhavana's life is regulated by traditional social norms that restrict women to caregiving roles regardless of their marital status. Her agency earned through single motherhood comes with relentless social scrutiny, creating a space where autonomy and subjugation coexist. Bhavana's journey in *Qabar* can be read as a powerful critique of the patriarchal structure that perpetuates the hierarchical nature of gendered labour. Pramod's absence is not merely a lack in the domestic sphere, but it indicates a larger societal framework that excludes men from caregiving responsibilities while overburdening women. Bhavana's double burden in managing the financial and psychological responsibilities of parenthood alone highlights how the patriarchal system perpetuates through the exploitation of women's labour. While her motherhood journey exhibits resilience and agency, it also underscores structured inequalities that continue to define single motherhood in patriarchal societies.

Single Motherhood: Strength and Struggle

In contemporary Indian society, single motherhood exhibits a significant paradoxical space – on the one hand, a site of autonomous existence and on the other, a terrain of systematic confinements. In *Qabar*, Bhavana's journey as a single mother portrays the dual realities of struggle and freedom, showing

how patriarchal structure restructures maternal agency. The expectations of the society from single mothers range from economic responsibilities to psychological resilience. These social expectations are deeply engraved in a patriarchal framework that both challenges and redefines their lived experiences. This novel thus becomes a powerful tool for understanding the strengths and limitations of single motherhood. Through Bhavana's story, Meera attempts to expose the traditional patriarchal family structure that imposes immense challenges on women while granting a privilege of detachment from men. By situating Bhavana's struggle within a broader feminist discourse on gendered division of labour, she not only critiques patriarchal family structure but also tries to open up a discussion on the basic need for a structural change of the same. In this way, the novella challenges the traditional patriarchal understanding of motherhood. Bhavana's motherhood journey is, at the same time, an inspiring and constant reminder of the gendered inequalities pervaded in the family sphere and beyond. Motherhood in Indian patriarchal society has long been conceived as an essential structure and an inescapable phase of a woman's life. In such a culture, the worth of a woman is often equated with her ability to give birth and sacrifice. In Jasodhara Bagchi's (2017) words,

... motherhood became a determining icon in the different levels of the emergence of Indian society, both in the shaping of state formation, in large part under global dispensation, and in the impact of the 'everyday' in the lives of our women. A peculiar dialectic between the ideology of imperialism and the Indian resistance to it resulted in motherhood's emergence as a kingpin of Indian feminism both as a myth and a reality. (Bagchi 6)

She also argues that such glorification of motherhood ultimately highlights the subordination of women, associating their identities and social value to their maternal identities, particularly as mothers of sons (Bagchi 5). This ideological frame perpetuates patriarchal control over women's lives. Bhavana's ability to navigate her personal as well as professional life independently adds strength to Bhavana's personality. Despite systematic oppression, she thrives in her professional life, which is mostly a male-dominated profession. It is after her divorce that she appears as well as clears in the judicial examination to become the District Judge which marks a significant turning point in her professional life. Her role as a judge not only grants her institutional authority but also becomes a site where she negotiates justice both professionally and personally, establishing that single mothers can maintain professional aspirations while fulfilling motherhood responsibilities. This aligns with Adrienne Rich's observation in her book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1986), that motherhood can also act both as an oppressive structure and a source of empowerment when

restructured on women's own terms while this social structure has traditionally imposed restrictive roles on mothers, restructuring those norms by single mothers like Bhavana exhibits a powerful site of agency (125). According to her, motherhood is defined as a woman's potential relationship with her ability to procreate and her close bond with her children "and the institution, which aims to ensure that such potential – and all women – remain under male control" (13). By demonstrating the critical significance of their socio-biological function as mothers, the primary effect—and the objective itself—of this regulatory effort is to confine women's agency to the gendered sphere of the home.

The independence Bhavana gains allows her to alter the traditional gender roles. In doing so, she explores the transformative potentials of single motherhood – which cannot merely read as a struggle for survival but also a scope for self-definition. By choosing to deny the oppressive structure of marriage, she finally curves out a life for herself that prioritises her ambitions and her son's future. This restructured definition of motherhood highlights how resilience and autonomy can manifest despite systematic oppression. Bhavana even attends Pramod's wedding, and this act can be read as her exercising of agency, as she narrates: "I looked at Pramod in the eye and congratulated him. He looked deflated. Thus, I drew the last drop of water from the well, drank it, and turned the vessel upside down. Duty done, I departed" (Meera 76). Bhavana's act of "turning the vessel upside down" exhibits her final act of closing the chapter of her marriage with Pramod, where she consciously discards all the emotions tied to it. Her presence at Pramod's wedding holding the hands of Advait is not her submission but rather a demonstration of her agency. By reclaiming control over the narrative, Bhavana redefines single motherhood not as a passive role of sacrifice but as an active process of self-assertion.

Single motherhood in Indian society is deeply regulated by the concept of morality and virtue. Sudhir Kakar (1981) opines that fatherhood in India is only concerned with financial security rather than emotional support. However, contemporary feminist discourse strategically challenges this discourse by positioning single mothers like Bhavana as the site of strength rather than deviation. While rejecting the traditional framework of family, Bhavana creates new maternal identities that critically reject the financial dependency on the father. As Nivedita Menon (2012) argues, the conflict between traditional gender roles and modern value systems creates new room for reimagining family structures. Bhavana's decision to raise her neurodivergent son alone reiterates Chodorow's (1978) concept of the "active nature" of mothering, where women attempt to redefine family structure beyond the boundaries of marriage. This further echoes Uma Chakravarty's

(2018) understanding that economic independence can be a form of resistance against systematic patriarchal oppression.

Conclusion

K. R. Meera's *Qabar* strongly critiques the patriarchal structure of the family by exposing the gendered division of domestic labour and the burdens imposed on single motherhood. Bhavana's journey as a single mother challenges the broader social expectations that imagine women as primary caregivers while allowing men the privilege of detachment from familial responsibilities. The absent father in the novella is not merely a personal lack for Bhavana but rather can be studied as a structural manifestation of patriarchal power, reinforcing the ideology that parenting is primarily a mother's responsibility. This absence of the father, as the paper argues, intensifies Bhavana's struggle as a single mother but also gives her a scope to carve out an independent identity, challenging the traditional notion of marriage and motherhood. While borrowing the feminist theoretical framework, this research has examined single motherhood as a paradoxical space of strength and struggle. Bhavana's story portrays the double burden of single motherhood as it is stigmatised by social prejudices and at the same time shows how her lived experiences challenge the conventional idea of marriage and parenting. This conflict reflects a larger structural disparity where patriarchal society identifies only women with nurturing responsibilities. Heidi Hartmann's (1981) concept of the patriarchal mode of production has been used here to understand Bhavana's situation as a single mother. The novella also foregrounds how motherhood has been historically and socially constructed as an act of sacrifice. The cultural conception of motherhood in India, as examined by Jasodhara Bagchi (2017) and Amrita Nandy (2017), operates as a regulatory mechanism that naturalises the burdens of maternity as a compulsion for women. However, *Qabar* does not simply portray Bhavana as a victim of such a conception, rather, it situates her within a space of resistance. Despite all kinds of constraints, Bhavana's narrative does not end in mere submission. Instead, her journey exhibits a scope to reconfigure the family structures beyond the dictated patriarchal framework. Her ability to negotiate both professional and personal spaces as a single mother showcases a redefinition of maternal agency outside the marital constraints. It also challenges the patriarchal understanding that only imagines male members as the head of the household as it proposes an alternative structure where an autonomous mother is at the centre of the discourse of parenting. By positioning Bhavana's struggles within a broader feminist criticism of gendered labour, *Qabar* becomes an important literary intervention that demands a reassessment of the unequal distribution of labour in familial and social spheres. Ultimately, this paper has demonstrated that

single motherhood in *Qabar* serves the purpose of a critical tool through which the intersection of gender, labour and patriarchy can be examined. Bhavana's journey exemplifies how the patriarchal structures continue to regulate women's lives by imposing compulsions of parenting responsibilities, ultimately offering an alternative model of the same beyond the constraints of patriarchy.

Works Cited

- Bagchi, Jasodhara. *Interrogating Motherhood*. SAGE Publications, 2017.
- Bhasin, Kamla. *Understanding Gender*. Kali for Women, 2000.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree, 2003.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. 2nd ed. Palgrave, 1999.
- Devika, J. "K. R. Meera and the New Feminism in Malayalam Fiction". *Indian Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, Sahitya Akademi, 2014, pp. 145–152.
- Ghosh, Nandini. *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice*. Springer, 2016.
- Hartmann, Heidi. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union." *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, edited by Lydia Sargent, South End Press, 1981, pp. 1–42.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Majumdar, Lila. "Position of Women in Modern India." *Great Women of India*, edited by Swami Madhavananda and R. C. Majumdar, Advaita Ashrama, 1953, pp. 112–128.
- Meera, K. R. *Qabar*. Eka, 2020.
- Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Zubaan, 2012.
- Nandy, Amrita. *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women*. Zubaan, 2017.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. Stanford UP, 2001.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Beacon Press, 1989.
- Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid. "Introduction." *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Kali for Women, 1989. *Colonial History*.
- Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Blackwell, 1990.

- Walby, Sylvia. “Theorising Patriarchy.” *Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1989, pp. 213–234.
- Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, Oxford University Press, 1947.