



# De-Mystifying the Feminine: K. R. Meera's The Angel's Beauty Spots

**Deepthi Menon**

Assistant Professor in English,

Chetana College of Media and Performing Arts, Thrissur 680026  
Kerala, India.

**Abstract:** Women's Writings most often fulfil an implicit anticipation of finding new definitions for existence and survival, revealing multiple dimensions involved in the process of 'being' and 'becoming' women. K.R. Meera, the renowned Malayalam writer, is known for her instinctive awareness of various interlocking forces at work and a deeper perception into the predicament of women in family and society. I am attempting a feminist reading of her work *Malaghayude Marukukal (The Angel's Beauty Spots: Three Novellas)*, to reveal the subversive acts of the protagonists while in executing their autonomy and asserting their existence.

**Key Words:** Gender-Stereotypes, Feminine-Mystique, Search for Identity

K. R. Meera is an Indian author and journalist, who writes in Malayalam and has received several awards including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2013), Odakkuzhal Award (2013), Vayalar Award (2014) and Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award (2015). Her novel *Aarachar (Hangwoman)* is widely regarded as one of the best literary works produced in Malayalam language and it was also shortlisted for the 2016 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. She has several collections of short stories, novellas, novels and children's books to her credit. Though her works invariably explore themes relating to patriarchy, discrimination, and individuality, the author declares that she does not intend to be called a feminist; rather she wants her readers to think and understand the role of women in our society. She also believes that, it is very difficult for any writer to shut down from what is happening in and around society, as their writing reflects what's happening in society, through a mixture of conscious and unconscious creative intuition and craft.

Her work, *The Angel's Beauty Spots: Three Novellas* dissects the inner regions of the human psyche, revealing the unconscious threads of human mind and analysing interior motives and existential traits. Based on mythological and archetypal images, these stories explore the hidden impulses in the unconscious depths where all the dualities of the surface — love and violence, life and death — fuse inextricably, striving to exist together. The titular story in *The Angel's Beauty Spots* centres on Angela, a single mother with incredible and unbelievable grit, power, and will, living unapologetically outside conventional morality. The story is interesting for the play of extreme vulnerability and pragmatism of Angela's character, who amazes us with unconventional ideologies and thought processes. Constantly debunking the stereotypes, she exhibits strength and cleverness and doesn't fear to speak her mind and her capability as a vehement individual is evident throughout the story. The second novella, 'And Forgetting the Tree, I...', effectively uses the metaphor of tree to speak of various nuances of love and life, laying bare the raw emotions of man and woman, exploring love and lust through the contours of the body, depicting the internal drama that the protagonist Radhika experiences ---who has settled into the monotonous rhythm of middle-aged life after a traumatic childhood and youth -- when her lover from the past re-enters her life. 'Deepest Blue' portrays a protagonist who longs for an all-consuming love that transgresses all moral codes of the time, burning bright at both ends, searing all things around it, redeeming and emancipating herself, even transcending the notion of time itself.

An angel is a supernatural being in various religions. The English word 'angel' is derived from the Greek word 'angelos,' which means 'messenger.' Abrahamic religions most often depict them as messengers of God, benevolent celestial intermediaries between Heaven and humanity, acting as protectors and guides for humans. Religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam say that an important part of angels' work is worshiping and praising God who created them and serving Him faithfully. Just as their name implies, angels may deliver God's messages to humans, such as by comforting, encouraging, or warning people according to what's best in each situation into which God sends them. Angels were also believed to have control over certain spheres through which a soul was to pass as it freed itself from the shackles of its material existence, to attain its eventual union with the ultimate spiritual reality. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, say that angels can be beings who have worked their way up from low to high spiritual planes by passing spiritual tests. They are seers and seekers of truth, continuing to grow wiser

and stronger even after they have attained an angelic state. In Sikhism, angels record the decisions of all people --- deeds that other humans can see and also those which are hidden from other people but known to God. Thus, angels have their significance primarily in what they do rather than in what they are. Whatever inherent nature they possess in cosmic hierarchy, is in terms of their relationship to their source, the ultimate being. The Western iconography --- the graphic and symbolic representations of angels, however, has to some extent posited semi-divine or even divine status to angelic figures, granting them essential identities that often surpass their functional relationships to the sacred and their performative relationships to the profane world. Thus in the system of images/symbols in art, they have been popularly depicted as creatures, spotlessly chaste and flawless, with serene human faces and powerful wings, often gleaming with light from within.

The concept that woman is nothing but a womb, was perhaps the basic perception of the role of the female in society and literature, down the centuries. In the male-centred societies of the world, men used women as beautiful puppets to pacify their lust and to bear and rear children. Women were relevant only in so far as they contributed to the well-being of men's lives. With all socio-political and economic powers being vested in men, women had no choice but to submit to the pressures of social norms. They learned early in life the need for adjustments and submissiveness and hesitated to develop strong opinions. The male ego expected only a second-rate self from the female, which was trained to repress its aspirations and hesitant to express itself. Their voices went unheard in social spheres, their experiences were overlooked and their presences were marginalised. Patriarchal world, thus, reduced women's existence into fixed terms and categories, in which the norms worked out by specific cultures through ages acted as the defining and limiting repressive forces. By clearly defining gender-identities and gender-roles, it foregrounded the hegemonic group, unavoidably marginalising the 'other' --- all the weaker sections. According to Kate Millet, this is the most ingenious kind of interior colonisation, as the victims themselves become unconscious participators in their own repression, with an internalisation of the very codes that keep them subjugated in the image of the 'ideal'. This kind of gender-socialisation slowly indoctrinates people to accept such socially-constructed codes of identity as definitive and inevitable, deforming their personality with exaggerated stereotypical lines of identity-categories.

These stereotypical images have reinforced the importance of women's role as a devout wife and doting mother, patiently and constantly serving men and his system with uncomplaining enthusiasm. The phrase 'feminine mystique' was created by Betty Friedan to show the assumptions that women would be fulfilled from their housework, marriage, sexual lives, and children. It was said that women, who were actually feminine, should not have wanted to get an education, to work, to have political opinions or exist as conscious social and historical beings. It is always considered to be a merit to play the roles modestly and obediently, ungrudgingly serving the master/authority. Their angelic virtues are taken for granted; their sacrifices and aspirations are ignored. Conservative societies expect women to be of meek and soft disposition, like that of angels, and should find their lives' biggest fulfilment in living for others. They disagree with women who give expression to their thoughts, emotions and desires and consider it as an unpardonable blasphemy. This makes women to feel somehow unnatural and abnormal of them to place any activity above and beyond the prescribed norms.

K.R. Meera rejects these gender-stereotypes, redefine the concept of 'feminine' by modifying gender archetypes and fulfils a distinctly political function of challenging the male-gaze that define women as invisible, voiceless victims. Her protagonists are not domesticated-angels in the traditional sense, who are trapped in the nets of domesticity with total self-surrender to the enslaving system. On the other hand, they are angels with spotted differences, who refuse to conform to the generally accepted roles of femininity and inferiority. They show a radical resistance against the patriarchal concept of normality and yearn to find a space for effective self-expression and survival. They violate the taboos of society and orthodox codes of conduct, refusing to take pleasure in passivity and meaningless conformity. They clearly point to the unequal nature of the relationship within patriarchy, which normatively tries to put women in the 'proper' position, below men, undervaluing their existence. It leads to women's loss of will and reason, denoting a pause in their existence. But these women are intensely conscious of themselves as human individuals, where men try to objectify them as play-things, and their vision is particularised by their female sensibilities, daringly articulating the dreams, desires, hurts and disenchantments that they have received and experienced. Even while living in a society where women are forced to repress any spontaneous expression of their sexuality, where they are culturally and psychologically conditioned to believe that chaste women have sublimated their lively exuberance, sexuality, freedom of choice and decision-making capacities, K.R. Meera's protagonists do not falter to go through an honest and fearless exploration of their female psyche and sexuality. They have unapologetically expressed the candid, uninhibited utterances of love and sex and its intimate details and processes, with a frank admission of emotional disintegration, frustrations and disillusionments within the confines of marital relationships. These female-protagonists rebel against the conventions and restraints of society and express explicitly the conflict of morality and female sexuality, unlocking a space to speak of their desires, to stand up for themselves and voice out their angst instead of fading into the four walls of marital and household duties. They are also bold to talk about their traumas and failures in a male-dominated world, and show how they try to maintain their sense of space and identity amidst the contrast between their desires and the spasm, where the clam of fulfilment evades forever the physical and emotional planes. These women are trying to define themselves against the fraught, emotionally sterile landscape of a harsh callous patriarchal world, playing out various roles of unwilling and unhappy mistresses, wives and mothers, forced to hide their existential anguish beneath the mask of fake ecstasy they are supposed to wear on. But they daringly unmask the emotional vacuity and hollowness of sexual love that linger in the masculine world and hauntingly make us aware of the dehumanisation in an exploitative world which is conspicuous by the sheer absence of love and by its excessive preoccupation with vacant lustfulness. They crave for a genuine satiation in love, but get deeply hurt when it is denied. Mere sexual union, devoid of love sickens them, badly bruising their female sensibilities. The longing to discover one's self in passionate love is openly admitted and discussed. In yearning for love outside the bidding of marriage, these women are never justifying adultery and infidelity, but they are revealing a search for an ideal relationship that gives love, satisfaction and security to overcome the sense of inadequacy that had been imposed upon them by the normative society. They confess an inevitable quest for love that they undertake, an intense longing to find fulfilment, their inner mind frankly and clearly willed to race towards love in all its personifications. It becomes symbolic of their audacious search for meaningful experiences, for sights as well as insights that grant them authenticity of existence.

K. R. Meera presents before us the plight of women with sparks for individuation, fluttering like trapped souls in their attempts to actualise their existence, longing for recognition as full-fledged human beings who can take charge of their mind, bodies, dreams, decisions and lives. Through the extreme fineness of characterisation, the author vehemently expresses the crises of the female psyche within the hypocritical paraphernalia of a conservative society. The social and psychological realities that they confront are recognizable, authentic and inclusive. The female protagonists show an unflinching courage to break the feminine-mystique of subordination and docility, seeking new ways to affirm their existence against the organised strictures of the hegemony. Boldly stripping off the deceptive aura of the socially-moulded femininity, they explore more flexible ways that ensure a better and meaningful existence. Subverting the clogged physical/sexual/social assumptions of the patriarchal world, they boldly choose their terms and conditions of life in a free-floating manner, discovering the pluralities of life and shattering the burden of victimization through their free-willed quests. The spots that distinguish their appearance and existence, but, do not become a blemish in their journey; they become markers of their subversive defiance, resistance and freedom of will and expression. Thus, they become 'messengers' of alternate life-designs, who deconstruct the gendered constructions and expectations of patriarchy, swimming against the currents, recovering their sense of self, discovering new definitions for empowerment, self-preservation and survival.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bryson, Valerie. *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*. London: Mac Millan, 1992.
2. Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
3. Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton and Company, 1963.
4. Graham, Billy. *Angels: God's Secret Agents*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1975.
5. Higonet, Margaret R., ed. *The Representation of Women in Fiction*. Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983.
6. Iyengar, K.R.Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. 1962. New Delhi: Sterling, 1985.
7. Larrington, Carolyne, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*. London: Pandora Press, 1992.
8. Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1969. London: Virago, 1977.
9. Meera, K.R. *The Angel's Beauty Spots*. Trans. J. Devika. New Delhi: Aleph, 2019.
10. Prasad, Amarnath, ed. *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2003.
11. Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post-Colonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993.

