

Patriarchy, Parenthood, and the Politics of Absence: Single Motherhood in K.R. Meera's *Qabar**

¹**Ms. Subhasnata Mohanta**, Research Scholar, NIT Durgapur, Assistant Professor, Adamas University, Kolkata (West Bengal), India. mohantasubhasnata@gmail.com

²**Dr. Sutanuka Banerjee**, Assistant Professor, N.I.T. Durgapur (West Bengal), India. sutanukabanerjee@yahoo.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.26b>

Abstract

The paper examines how K.R. Meera's novella Qabar (2022) 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 in 2021 and translated into English by Nisha Sushan in 2022, 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. Protagonist Bhavana's struggle to raise her neurodivergent son intersects and merges with her professional challenges, reflecting societal expectations that equate womanhood with maternal sacrifice. Her husband Pramod's absence in parenting highlights the systematic privileges granted to fathers by the patriarchal structure. The narrative eventually 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 also 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 have 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* (2022) which is originally published in Malayalam in 2021 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 family structure privileges men to disassociate themselves from parenting responsibilities while women are expected to sacrifice personal and professional goals in the name of the duties of motherhood. Bhavana's journey that mirrors her mother's life highlights not only her personal resilience but also the structural oppression associated with the cultural expectations associated with motherhood. Her struggle emphasises how women are always expected to opt for sacrificial motherhood despite professional success. Meera's novella thus emerges as a site for witnessing the paradoxes of single motherhood, both as a burden and a scope for exercising agency. This paper examines *Qabar* within a feminist framework to show

***Article History:** Full Article Received on 02nd June 2025. Peer Review completed on 15th July 2025, Article Accepted on 22nd Aug. 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

how patriarchal structure problematises the struggles of single mothers while also allowing them some space to redefine maternal autonomy.

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

The patriarchal nature of Indian society institutionalises male dominance, marginalising women within social, economic, and cultural spheres. Sylvia Walby (1990) describes this as “private patriarchy”, where the familial structure perpetuates male dominance and marginalises women through some individual patriarchs (Walby, 1990). 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, where women are designated with the caregiving and sacrificial responsibilities (Bhasin, 2000). 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 men acquired the skills in the process of control and hierarchical organisation (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... 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 as 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 the Indian family system, where fatherhood is only associated with earning a livelihood. The absence of a father in the everyday process of parenting is structurally produced through the patriarchal social norm that equates masculinity with breadwinning rather than 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 framework concurrently establishes motherhood as a place of psychological labour, obligation, and sacrifice. Literary representations of such ideal women have shaped Indian womanhood into a new form, and Indian women’s selflessness and sacrifice are unquestionably noble, and it is hard to deny them the respect and adoration they deserve for being a patient and suffering group of people. This structure simultaneously constructs the concept of motherhood as a site of psychological labour, duty, sacrifice and self-abnegation of the Indian woman (Majumdar 25). 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. 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 Weber (1947), Sylvia Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as "a system of government in which men rule societies through their positions of head of the household" (214). Such a framework advantages men with 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. 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 Chakravarti's (2003) understanding of 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, Bhavana'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 Bhavana's

struggle as she has always been expected to compensate for the void created by that absence. Bhavana 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).

Bhavana’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 Bhavana 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, Bhavana’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 explore 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 and 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 often marginalises single mothers, representing them as incomplete without male support. Nandini Ghosh (2016) identifies that single mothers, particularly those who are divorced, occupy a contradictory space, as on the one hand, they are celebrated for resilience and on the other, stigmatised for rejecting the normative familial structure (22). Similarly, Bhavana's role in the novel as a single mother is both eulogised and criticised. When the lack of patriarchal control grants her a sense of autonomy, this autonomy is many a time curtailed by the societal framework that designates women with caregiving responsibilities. As Judith Butler defines gender as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519), Bhavana's deviation from this stylisation therefore invites several criticisms. The novel criticises how the patriarchal structure systematically marginalises through the unequal distribution of parenting responsibilities. Bhavana's double burden highlights the systematic exploitation of women's labour within the family sphere, as reproductive labour is often considered the foundation of all forms of labour (Federici 8). Therefore, Bhavana's journey exhibits how single motherhood amid the Indian patriarchal structure becomes a conflicted site where resistance and subjugation coexist revealing the politics of caregiving.

Single Motherhood: Strength and Struggle

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 establishing that single mothers can maintain professional aspiration 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 Advaith 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 understanding dismantles this traditional notion by placing single mothers like Bhavana as the site of strength rather than a lack. While challenging the traditional notions associated with family, Bhavana aspires to create a new maternal identity that denies the financial support of a father figure, as the conflict between traditional gender roles and the modern value system offers space to reimagine family structure. Bhavana’s decision to raise Advaith alone aligns with Chodorow’s (1978) concept of the “active nature” of mothering, which is not confined through marriage.

Conclusion

The novella, *Qabar* powerfully critiques the patriarchal nature of family as it lays bare the gendered structure of domestic labour and parenting. Bhavana’s journey as a single mother challenges the traditional social expectations that imagine women as caregivers while detaching men from domestic duties. Pramod’s absence from the arena of parenthood not only creates a personal void but also a systematic implication of patriarchal power, reinforcing the ideology that parenting is essentially maternal. Heidi Hartmann observes how women’s domestic labour is appropriated under male dominance, where men absolutely control women’s labour in the patriarchal mode of production both within and outside domestic spheres (Hartmann 15). Bhavana’s struggle simultaneously exhibits constraints and resistance. As Sara Ruddick contends, “maternal thinking is shaped by social structures that often exploit rather than support mothers” (Ruddick 24), Bhavana’s narrative reflects the double burdens, stigmatised as a single mother exercising her agency to carve out an autonomous identity. bell hooks also notes that patriarchy teaches women that their worth lies in service, sacrifice, and submissiveness (hooks 84), an ideology Bhavana challenges through her maternal and professional success. Drawing on the arguments of Jasodhara Bagchi and Amrita Nandy, this paper examines how motherhood in India—as reflected in the novella—is historically framed in terms of self-sacrifice, thereby reinforcing conventional gender roles and expectations of women’s subservience. Bhavana, however, alters this norm, using her maternal agency, which is not supported by a marital validation. Following Adrienne Rich’s suggestion that there must be a difference between “experience and institution” (Rich 13), *Qabar* highlights this binary opposition by foregrounding Bhavana’s struggle within institutional patriarchal structures. Bhavana’s story thus becomes a tool through which the traditional notions of gender, labour, and patriarchy are critiqued, ultimately advocating for a transformative feminist politics of care.

Works Cited

- Bagchi, Jasodhara. *Interrogating Motherhood*. SAGE Publications, 2017.
- Bhasin, Kamla. *Understanding Gender*. Kali for Women, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/3207893<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>
- 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.
- Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press, 2012.
- 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 Sergent, Black Rose Books, 1981.
- hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1981.
- K R Meera. *Qabar*. Eka, 2020.
- Majumdar, Lila. "Position of Women in Modern India." *Great Women of India*, edited by Swami Madhavananda and R. C. Majumdar, Advaita Ashrama, 1953.
- 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, editors. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Kali for Women, 1989.
- 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*. Translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, Oxford UP, 1947.