

**Warrior's Woman to Woman Warrior: Gender Negotiations and Reclaiming
Military Identity in Aditi Mathur Kumar's *Operation Payback***

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Abstract:

Aditi Mathur Kumar's *Operation Payback* offers a significant representation of women's experiences within the military and interrogates the gendered structures that shape their professional identities. The novel moves beyond the conventional image of the woman as a passive or subordinate figure and presents a female protagonist who negotiates courage, authority, duty, and personal identity within a predominantly male military environment. The transformation from "warrior's woman" to "woman warrior" signifies a movement from an identity defined through association with male military power to one grounded in female agency and selfhood. This paper examines the gender negotiations involved in this transformation and analyses how Kumar challenges conventional assumptions about femininity, military service, and women's capabilities. It further explores the protagonist's struggle to reclaim military identity through resilience, professional competence, and self-assertion. The paper argues that *Operation Payback* reconfigures the relationship between gender and military identity by foregrounding women's agency, resistance, and claim to equal participation in spaces traditionally dominated by men.

Keywords: military identity, female agency, women in the military, gender roles

Indian military fiction frequently presents the soldier as a figure of courage, sacrifice, patriotism, and national service. However, the lives of the women associated with soldiers are often represented through their relationships with men. A daughter becomes a bride, a bride becomes an army wife, and an army wife who loses her husband becomes a war widow. In each stage, her identity is defined largely by her relationship with the soldier rather

than by her own actions. Aditi Mathur Kumar's *Operation Payback* (2023) begins within this familiar framework but gradually challenges it. The novel follows Meera Chauhan from an engineering graduate who marries Captain Ranvijay, a Para Special Forces commando, to a grieving widow and finally to a commissioned intelligence officer who participates in the operation against, Khayyum, the man responsible for her husband's death. Her decision to join the army and embrace the ultimate sacrifice, despite her husband's tragic death, is deeply inspiring. Penguin Random House India describes the novel as the story of a "*Veer Nari*" who proves herself a warrior and a hero, emphasizing bravery, heroism, and the transformation of loss into purposeful action ("*Operation Payback*").

R.W. Connell explains that military institutions are closely associated with hegemonic masculinity (77–81), while Judith Butler emphasizes that gendered identities are produced through repeated and disciplined performances (33–34). Orna Sasson-Levy's study of military masculinity further demonstrates how military practices produce particular bodily and emotional ideals of the warrior (296–321). Megan MacKenzie challenges the assumption that women are naturally incapable of combat and shows how the exclusion of women has often been sustained through institutional beliefs and cultural myths rather than through evidence of inability (9–14). These perspectives help explain the tension at the centre of *Operation Payback*: Meera enters a predominantly masculine institution, but her legitimacy is ultimately established through competence, discipline, and action.

Meera as the Warrior's Woman

Meera's journey is shaped by family expectations and her relationship with Ranvijay. She is an engineering graduate with ambitions of working for a multinational company, but her father arranges her marriage to Captain Ranvijay. He believes that the wife of a soldier should be prepared to follow her husband and accommodate his profession (Kumar 84–86). In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks examines how patriarchal structures restrict women's choices and emphasizes feminist struggle against sexist oppression and domination (5).

Meera does not accept this expectation completely. Before marriage, she secretly meets Ranvijay and makes it clear that she wants to continue her career after marriage. She refuses to marry him unless he supports her professional ambitions. Ranvijay agrees to her condition, and this agreement gives her temporary freedom to continue working (Kumar 86–87). Meera's professional freedom is not presented as an independent right, instead depends on the personal support of the man she is going to marry. Her negotiation is therefore a private arrangement rather than a claim to institutional or social equality.

This condition defines Meera's initial identity as the warrior's woman. She is connected to the world of military service but does not participate in it. Ranvijay calls her his "warrior princess," the expression appears affectionate and empowering, but it still

defines her through his identity as a warrior (Kumar 100). Cynthia Enloe's points out that military institutions depend not only on soldiers but also on the emotional and domestic labour of military wives, whose patience, adjustment, and support contribute to the functioning of military life (196–99). Meera's life as army wife is shaped by Ranvijay's military duties, the uncertainty and the emotional risks of his profession, but she has no independent role within military operations. Ranvijay goes to dangerous areas and performs military duties, while Meera waits for his return. When she cannot contact Ranvijay, she repeatedly calls military headquarters and waits anxiously for information (Kumar 17). Her anxiety is part of the emotional burden of military life. She belongs to the military family but not to the military institution, therefore her identity is therefore relational. She is therefore positioned as a "warrior's woman," whose emotional world is shaped by the dangers faced by the soldier but who has no direct operational agency.

Widows in historical and mythical evidences: Meera's denial of relational identity

Meera's widowhood can also be read against the long cultural and mythological history of the Hindu widow. In *Mahabharata*, Uttara becomes widow after Abhimanyu's death (Vyasa). In *Iliad*, Andromache faces widowhood after Hector's death (Bridges 16–41). In *Ramayana*, Tara and Mandodari similarly experience the loss of warrior-husbands (Valmiki). Bonnie White and Johnathan H. Pope observe that the war widows in Berta Ruck's First World War fiction shows how widows and war widows are represented as agents rather than objects of pity (1085–1102). In traditional Hindu thought, the widow was often defined primarily through her relationship to her deceased husband, and widowhood could involve severe restrictions on her social identity and personal choices. The mythic association of the ideal wife with complete devotion to the husband is particularly visible in narratives surrounding sati, in which a woman's loyalty is imagined through her willingness to follow her husband even in death (Courtright; Bright 227). Meera revolts against her identity as soldier's widow into a source of independent military agency. Instead of allowing widowhood to become the final definition of her identity, *Operation Payback* makes it the starting point of her transformation.

Ranvijay's death fundamentally changes Meera's situation. His death in insurgency operations in Kashmir not only removes the person she loves but also moves her from being a soldier's wife to being a war widow. The novel presents this change as emotionally devastating because Meera suddenly has to imagine a life without the person through whom much of her social and emotional identity has been defined (Kumar 118–22). Her response to the news of Ranvijay's death reveals the depth of this crisis. She questions why she is still alive when he is dead and struggles to understand how she should continue living without him (Kumar 120–22). The death of her husband exposes the weakness of an identity built primarily through attachment to another person.

The distinction between the warrior's woman and the woman warrior begins at this point. As long as Ranvijay is alive, Meera can remain connected to the military through him. Once he dies, she has to decide whether she will remain only a grieving widow or construct an identity of her own. The novel chooses the second possibility. Her decision to enter military service is influenced by Ranvijay's memory, but her subsequent progress depends upon her own efforts. The distinction between motivation and achievement is therefore important: Ranvijay's death motivates Meera, but it does not qualify her to become an officer (Inness 1-10).

War Widow to War Hero

Meera's decision to join the army marks the first major step toward independent agency. Meera is not simply trying to become like her husband, but trying to establish herself within the military institution. The Services Selection Board becomes the first major test of this new identity. Meera must compete with other candidates and prove that she possesses the qualities required for military service. It is not sympathy of *Veer Nari* that works in recruitment, but their physical and psychological fitness through rigorous evaluations (Sagar). The novel states that the selection process is extremely competitive and that Meera is among only four women selected from two hundred and fifty candidates (Kumar 148–50). The selection board does not select her because she is Ranvijay's widow. Her personal history cannot substitute for performance.

Her father-in-law initially hesitates to support her decision because he fears losing another child to military service. His resistance therefore comes from grief and fear rather than from a belief that Meera is incapable (Kumar 150–51). Once Meera succeeds in the selection process, his attitude begins to change. Her father-in-law places a tilak on her forehead and gives her a file containing Ranvijay's favourite war poem (Kumar 209–10). This stage is important because it marks a shift from personal approval to institutional recognition. Before Ranvijay's death, Meera needs her husband's approval to continue her career. After his death, she seeks recognition through her own performance. Her identity is no longer dependent on a husband's promise.

The transformation continues at the Officers Training Academy. Meera's military identity is produced through discipline, practice, and physical endurance. Meera struggles with the demands of training and receives additional punishment, but she continues until she completes the course, unlike the other three girls who left the academy (Kumar 170). Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity argues that gender is produced through repeated acts rather than simply expressed as an innate identity (33–34). Military training similarly constructs the soldier through repeated bodily and mental practices. Meera does not become a woman warrior simply rather becomes through repeated acts of training. She deliberately avoids revealing her identity as a war widow to other cadets because she fears that they may interpret her achievements through sympathy rather than merit (Kumar 161). Widowhood

has given Meera emotional motivation, but she does not want it to become the basis of her professional identity. She wants her colleagues to evaluate her according to her present performance rather than her past suffering. The warrior's woman is visible through her relationship with a soldier. The woman warrior wants to be recognized for her own abilities. Meera's decision to conceal her widowhood is therefore a form of professional self-definition. Ranvijay's death may explain why Meera chooses the military, but it cannot explain why she succeeds within it.

She begins this journey in the shadow of Ranvijay's death, but her determination gradually becomes personal. During training, she holds on to a private promise concerning courage and endurance rather than simply reproducing her husband's identity (Kumar 170). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity argues military institutions have historically been associated with qualities such as physical strength, endurance, aggression, hierarchy, and emotional control (77–81). Meera enters an institution in which these qualities have traditionally been associated with men. Her training therefore has a double function: it prepares her for military service and challenges the assumption that martial discipline is naturally masculine. Sasson-Levy similarly demonstrates that military training and combat practices shape the body and emotions of soldiers according to the ideals of military masculinity (296–321). Meera did not ask the institution to lower its standards for her but transformed herself to meet them.

Meera's excelled not only in physical training, but also in technical abilities. Meera's ethical hacking certification helps her to win hackathon at the Military College of Telecommunication Engineering. Her performance leads to her selection for an experimental Army Intelligence programme (Kumar 179–80). At this point, her military identity becomes increasingly connected to knowledge and technical expertise. As Ranvijay's wife, Meera's relationship with the military depends on emotional and familial attachment. As an intelligence officer, her value comes from what she can do. Her technical knowledge becomes a professional resource that the institution recognizes. This development strengthens the distinction between the warrior's woman and the woman warrior.

Laura Sjoberg's argues contemporary warfare increasingly involves intelligence, communication, surveillance, information systems, and technological expertise alongside physical combat (112–15). Meera's role explains that a woman warrior does not necessarily have to reproduce the exact physical role of a Para commando. She can contribute through another form of specialized expertise. This is one of the strongest aspects of Kumar's representation of female military agency. Meera does not become significant merely because she carries a weapon. Her intelligence, training, technical knowledge, and ability to interpret information make her valuable. Her professional legitimacy is thus based on competence rather than sentiment.

Meera as Women Warrior in Keran Operation

Meera's transformation is finally tested during the Keran operation, aimed to kill India's most wanted terrorist Khayyum and his team. In fact, this operation is designed based on the Meera's decoding of cryptic information transmitted in various online gaming platforms. Meera is assigned with a supporter role in the operation, not as the principal assault member of the team. Yet her technical and observational skills become crucial to the operation. She intercepts a fragment of enemy radio communication and realizes that Khayyum is attempting to escape toward the northwest (Kumar 218–20). Meera acts independently here, instead of waiting for a formal command, she moves toward the river and communicates the direction of the escaping target. Her decision allows the other members of the team to locate her and continue the operation (Kumar 218–20).

This scene represents the clearest transition from the warrior's woman to the woman warrior. Earlier in the novel, Meera waited for information about Ranvijay. She called headquarters because she could not reach him. Now she is the person who possesses information that can determine the course of an operation. Earlier, she waited for a soldier to return from danger. Now she enters danger herself. Her transformation is therefore expressed through a reversal of roles: the wife who once waited becomes the officer who acts; the woman who once received military information becomes the woman who gathers it; the woman protected by a soldier becomes a woman capable of protecting others; the widow who received recognition for her husband becomes the officer who earns recognition through her own action.

Confronting the Myth That Women Cannot Fight

Meera's encounter with Khayyum further develops the novel's gender argument. When she is captured, Khayyum mocks the Indian army for sending women to fight (Kumar 222). Megan MacKenzie argues that the belief that women cannot fight has often functioned as a cultural and institutional myth. Her study examines how ideas about combat, masculinity, physical strength, and male bonding have been used to justify the exclusion of women from combat roles (9–14). Meera resists her captors and uses a knife to fight back. She later fires a shot that wounds Khayyum in the knee, creating an opportunity for Major Rana's team to complete the operation (Kumar 222–26). Her action is central to the argument of the novel and directly affects the outcome of the mission. Meera's initial placement as support member, not as main assault team in the operation, represents gender inequality. Her technical knowledge, courage and quick decision to intercept the enemy without waiting for orders or backup support, made her to take revenge on Khayyum and his team. Kumar therefore moves her from the position of a person who is associated with military heroism to the position of a person who performs military heroism.

From Widow's Recognition to Warrior Identity

The significance of Meera's transformation becomes particularly clear in the novel's final ceremonial scene. Earlier, she had attended a ceremony in which Ranvijay was posthumously awarded the Kirti Chakra. She stood there as his widow, wearing a white sari and receiving public recognition connected to his sacrifice (Kumar 228–30). Later, she returns to the same Delhi parade ground to receive the Shaurya Chakra for her own actions (Kumar 228–30). The repetition of the setting creates a powerful structural contrast. The first ceremony establishes her identity as the *warrior's woman*. The second establishes her as the *woman warrior*. The difference is not simply between two medals. It is a difference in the source of recognition. The first honour belongs to Ranvijay, although Meera experiences its emotional consequences. The second belongs to Meera because of what she herself has accomplished. Her statement that heroism is not restricted by gender reinforces this transformation (Kumar 230). The novel thus presents military heroism as a quality that can be demonstrated through action rather than determined by sex.

Meera becomes an independent military professional, but she does not completely reject her earlier identity as Ranvijay's wife and widow. Meera does not become strong by forgetting Ranvijay, instead she becomes strong by refusing to let his death remain the final definition of her life. Her emotional attachment to Ranvijay becomes a source of strength rather than a permanent limitation. Sasson-Levy's work reminds us that individual achievement does not automatically transform the gender structure of the military institution (296–321). Meera's individual success therefore does not mean that all gender barriers have disappeared. Her achievements are treated as remarkable because women remain unusual in many of the positions she occupies. The novel celebrates individual agency while simultaneously exposing the institutional boundaries that restrict it.

Individual Achievement and Institutional Change

Meera's individual achievement brings a major change in military institutions. At the end of the novel, the Indian government decides to open combat roles to women in the army (Kumar 230). Sayantani Sur's discussion shows that military widows (*veer naris*) can become part of wider public discussions about sacrifice, nationalism, and military service. Meera's story moves from private grief to public recognition. The novel's optimistic ending, decision to allow women in combat roles, should also be examined critically. MacKenzie cautions that celebrating exceptional women does not necessarily remove the institutional structures that produce exclusion. One successful woman can sometimes become evidence that the system is already open, even when broader barriers remain (9–14).

Meera possesses unusual technical abilities, receives institutional support, and carries the symbolic status of a soldier's widow. Her experience may therefore not be easily transferable to every woman who wishes to enter military service. The novel presents her as

an exceptional case rather than as a complete representation of women in the armed forces. Nevertheless, the significance of her story lies precisely in the possibility that an exceptional individual can challenge an established expectation. Meera demonstrates that the categories of wife, widow, and warrior do not have to remain mutually exclusive. A woman can move through these identities without being permanently confined to any one of them.

A critical reading of Aditi Mathur Kumar's *Operation Payback* reveals that Meera's transformation is more complex than a simple movement from grief to revenge. The novel begins by placing her within a familiar social role: she is an educated woman whose ambitions are negotiated within marriage to a soldier. She is the wife of a warrior, but she is not a warrior herself. Ranvijay's death breaks this relational identity. Meera becomes a widow, and the loss forces her to create new identity. Her decision to join the army begins the process of reconstruction. The novel does not allow grief alone to make her a soldier. She must pass the Services Selection Board, complete rigorous training, develop technical expertise, and prove herself within a military institution shaped by masculine traditions. Her technical knowledge is especially important because it establishes a form of military authority that is not dependent upon physical imitation of male soldiers. As an intelligence officer, Lieutenant Meera demonstrates her technological knowledge and judgmental skills during the Keran operation. When she identifies Khayyum's plan to escape, she intercepts him, wounds him and becomes a direct agent in the success of the mission. The contrast between the two award ceremonies provides the clearest expression of this transformation. In the first, Meera stands as the widow of a decorated soldier. In the second, she receives a military honour for her own actions. The same woman therefore appears in two different forms: first as the warrior's woman, and later as the woman warrior.

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