

Replacing the Gender Stereotype: A Critical Study of *'The Thousand Faces of Night'*

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan's contribution to Indian English literature is commendable. In her novels Githa Hariharan has shown a commitment made by her to fight against the deeply entrenched biasedness of Indian patriarchal society against the females. For her challenges to give a voice to females against the social brutality made to female, Githa Hariharan has been able to establish herself as a promoter of feminism. However, her concept of feminism neither attempt to give priority to female by suppressing the males nor she strives for equal rights of both male and female. This concept of feminism is known as new age feminism which is not about the eradication of differences between the sexes or the attainment of equal prospects, but rather concerns the individual's rights to identify one in the society and be comfortable in one's own land and society. In her novels women have been the central subject and she has been found to make an attempt to present a woman against the age-old male dominated laws of the society. While attempting for this Githa Hariharan has tried to revision the ancient myths which were explained from a male point of view. In her novels, Githa Hariharan has been found to raise her voice against the patriarchal society where women had been restricted to the will and interest of their husbands or the in-laws. Githa Hariharan has blown up patriarchy and gender injustice in her novels and has brought out a new post-modern society where women search for their identity and liberty. She revolts against the age-old wisdom contained in myths and represents those myths from a feminist angle. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study Githa Hariharan's novel "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" as an attempt to replace the gender stereotype. Hariharan makes an attempt to replace the gender stereotype by depicting different females from different generations who make a journey from sacrifice to protest against the gender roles imposed by the patriarchy.

Key words: Feminism, Myths, Women, Revisioning, Identity

INTRODUCTION

In the Western literary world, women writers focused on the experience of being a woman within a certain social environment. But the feminist theories based on "gender" structured the shape of the feminist debate in the 1980s. These feminist theories identified and deconstructed gender stereotypes and encouraged women to seek alternative ways of life. The first wave of feminism came into existence in the 19th century. This first wave of feminism refers to the period from 1830s to early 1900s which focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women in the society. This first wave advocated that women should gain political rights in the form of right of voting. Their main focus was on the issues concerning sexual, reproduction and economic matters of women. "The second wave of feminism refers to the period of activity from 1960s to 1980s. it was continuation of the earlier phase of feminism where women were involving in fight against workplace sexuality and family and reproductive rights. The first wave was focused on rights of women and second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality such as ending discrimination in the society. The third wave of feminism came into existence in the early 1990s as a perceived response to the failure of the 2nd wave of feminism. The 3rd wave of feminism led to the formation of some varying feminist outlooks like the radicals, ego cultural feminist, the liberal reforms, the electoral, academic feminist etc. However, the fourth wave of feminism developed on the lines of social justice and spirituality and the 'subaltern' would have a strong role to play in future feminist developments. The fourth wave of feminism provided much scope to the subaltern to speak out their inner self. It was a revolt by the suppressed class of women to fight against the patriarchy to bring social justice and liberty to their self. Feminists argues that there should never be gender inequalities in representation of women in society. They believe that it is high time that the power structure of the Indian society must undergo a makeover so that neutralization of gender in the society can be brought into reality.

With the stress on feminist ideology, gender injustice and the role of women in Indian society, the Indian female discourse reflects a surge in the direction of myth busting and revisioning of the Indian myths from a female perspective. The role and status of women in these traditional tales underwent a revisioning by the Indian feminists

who sought to replace the male discourses which aimed at making women invisible and insignificant. The Feminist theories based on gender have set a new tradition in literature and look into woman's issues from a gyno-centric perspective by revisioning or remaking the myths with a view to replace the stereotypical image of women in the society where women feel having no identity and bludgeoned to play the male written subordinate roles. Patriarchy demands mute acceptance from a woman. She is still considered to be somebody's daughter, wife or mother having no identity of her own. In such situation, it becomes very difficult for a lady to survive. But the feminist discourse encourages women to seek alternative ways of life in order to survive.

Githa Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* advocates for both the second and the third wave of feminism. Githa supports existentialism strongly and even quotes and refers to existentialist implications in the Indian mythological stories of women. She also supports women in their choice of bearing children. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a picturesque of women's fight for her identity. It shows how marriage ties women in a bond of obligation towards her husband and the family at the cost of her happiness. Githa Hariharan shows how society is deeply concern about the duties and obligations of women but never shows any concern for a husband's duty to his wife. This is the age-old pattern of patriarchy prevalent in Indian society. In the novel the author also exposes how a modern educated woman loses her dreams in obeying the traditional customs of the society. She also reveals how an educated woman in countries like America live a life of complete freedom having own identity and how an educated woman in Indian society surrenders her dreams of a life full of liberty and identity in her attempt to follow the Indian tradition.

Indian feminist writer Githa Hariharan's first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (1992). 'The Thousand Faces of Night' may be read as revisionist myth-making program in which the novelist attempts to renew the whole community of women through revisioning of myths. The novel is not simply a womanist novel but a definite feminist writing in which myths are rewritten and retold from a feminine perspective with a view to replace the gender stereotype.

Analysis of 'The Thousand Faces of Night':

Githa Hariharan belongs to the second generation of postcolonial women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Mridula Garg, Anita Nair and Shobha De. These writers projected the stoic woman ultimately breaking traditional boundaries set by the patriarchy. Githa Hariharan used the technique of revisionism in her novels. She has revisioned either the myths or the history of the country. While doing this she has deconstructed the misogynous and colonial stereotypes which projected women having no independent life to live but to serve her husband in all faith, which would lead her to heaven. "Githa, in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, has revisited the women from the Myths. Githa looks at these myths from the eyes of a modern, educated woman. She challenges the patriarchal archetypes of these myths in *The Thousand Faces of Night*." (Sharma, 569)

Githa Hariharan's novels stimulate feminine consciousness. The novel is an inter-woven of the past and the present. Each of the female characters is compared to characters from mythology, restating the fact that women and their issues have significance and are similar in any point in history, irrespective of spatial and temporal difference. A woman is expected to be a devoted daughter, a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law and a caring mother. All the female characters of the novel have been exploited, belittled, suppressed and used by the male characters of their lives. Devi, the protagonist, is an embodiment of all the pains borne by the other characters, Sita, Mayamma and Parvatamma, as she finally defies society and revolts against the institution of marriage.

Githa Hariharan was familiar with myths and therefore she perfectly blended the myth and reality in the modern life in her fiction. Indian woman usually does not bother about her own happiness and comfort as much as she addresses herself to the task of making others happy and also upholding tradition and conventions of the society. In "*Thousand Faces of Night*" Githa Hariharan represents three women characters who represent two different status of women. Sita, Mayamma and Devi are the three central female characters in the novel. Sita and Mayamma are the representatives of Indian traditional woman and Devi represents modern women. Sita and Mayamma silently accept the traditional role imposed by the patriarchal society and confine themselves to the limitation set by the social and familial obligations. They become deaf to the longings of their heart. They are symbols of sacrifice and tolerance. One day Sita's heard her father-in-law roaring, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law? (Hariharan 30) Sita hung her head over the veena for a minute and then she reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They came apart with a discordant twang of protest. She looked up at her husband, her eyes dry and narrowed, and said in a clear and stinging whisper, "Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in-law." (Hariharan 30) After that day nobody saw her touched the veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law. But the modern woman does not find any sense in being acquiescent. It doesn't appeal to her imagination to be a suffering and sacrificial individual.

Mayamma is a traditional woman. She believes that her place is with her husband and family. Whatever be her troubles, she does not speak because she is a custodian of traditional religious ethos and accepts that the woman should be under control of the father in the maidenhood, the husband within the youth and sons during her adulthood. Traditionally, it is supposed that a bride is not to have a voice of her own and Mayamma believes this and therefore she could not resist the torture she was assigned by the cruelty of her in-laws. In a traditional society, those women can be

happy who blindly and unthinkingly accept the roles it assigns them and Mayamma tried to find happiness in the midst of unhappiness that she had to embrace. Mayamma belongs to the generation of girls who quietly bore to death their liabilities and never rebelled albeit they wanted to, because it had been considered outrageous for a woman to shirk away her familial bindings even if she was crushed underneath it. Women like Mayamma go on to give up and live a painful, humiliating life because they have no option. Likewise, Sita also compromises with her ardor for the Veena. She also accepts that her pleasure is rooted in the happiness of her husband and father-in-law.

But Devi, a modern woman, looks life from a different angle. She is bold and rebellious. She rejects the traditional role of woman and rebels against the patriarchal society. Devi comes back to Madras from America with higher education only to be sucked in by the old order of things- a demanding mother's love, a proper but empty marriage, an unsuitable lover. She is prejudiced by the myths told by different narrators viz. Mayamma and Baba, her father-in-law about mythical woman characters like Gandhari, Parvati, Sita and Snake woman who sincerely comply with their husbands, and by the stories of violent women like Kritya and Amba who take their revenge in the event of male domination. The stories differ with women like Gandhari, Parvati, Sita and woman married to a snake that are obedient to their husbands, and with women like Kritya, Amba who struggle for their vengeance. They provide two distinctive views for women one to be passive, the other rebellious. But ultimately it is the survival of the woman which is important shown through the female characters in the novel. They show her what is to stay and endure, what it is to break free and move on.

Through the character of Devi's grandmother Githa Hariharan introduces myth into the novel. Githa Hariharan believes that each story narrated by the grandmother is a solution for Devi's childish questions. Devi's grandmother, though does not figure anywhere in the novel's events, interprets the ancient myths and legends in a refreshingly modern way. For instance, the act of Gandhari's blindfolding herself after discovering her husband's affliction, is not interpreted as an act of self-sacrifice and duty but as an act of protest.

In the novel when Devi's mother Sita wants Devi to get married and settle down in her life, she wants to arrange a swayamvara. Though Devi is not interested to get married, she accepts the proposal as she never wanted to hurt her mother's feelings. Within a span of three months she meets six bride grooms. Devi relinquishes her ties with her American past life and accepts marriage and a future for herself as a wife and mother. But she is troubled by the gods and goddesses of her childhood. Devi feels trapped in her house and her role as a wife till she runs away into the arms of her lover, Gopal. "He has been a polite stranger in the weeks since our wedding. I can't help admiring his restraint, his detachment which views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other. It is a gamble, he says." (Hariharan, 49)

The Thousand Faces of Night deals with the identity crisis of a modern Indian woman like Devi. Modern women do not want to be tied by the bonding of traditional values, rather they want to fly but that desire is cut off after marriage. Seeking her emancipation and own identity Devi eloped with Gopal violating the traditional norms.

"In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality." (Padmini and Sudha 126)

The world of myth and fable act as a blue print for her life. Being influenced by myths, Devi changes her outlook towards life and accordingly, she assumes different faces from her childhood to a married woman and then finally to a liberated modern woman. The mythical stories turn out to be a part of Devi's life that she thinks of herself as the very manifestation of all the avenging deities. Revolting against the patriarchal tradition, Devi leaves her husband. She finds new lover Gopal and one day she elopes with Gopal. But Devi's new life with Gopal does not provide her the feeling of happiness she longed for. She also gets disheartened with him and moves back once again. Devi fails to find any difference between Mahesh and Gopal. Both of them love their jobs to their hearts and Devi's presence or absence would make no difference to either of them. She believes herself to be a greedy girl for a better future, a foolish girl. "I was always greedy for good fortune. Foolish girl. I dived into the water just as the sun set on the bathers going homeward. I found that perfect hyacinth. But as I hung on to it with all my strength, it dragged me down into muddy, violet swamp." (Hariharan 112) She comes back to her mother's home, the only safe place for a daughter, in search of a more resolute relationship, self-identity and liberty with an offer of love.

CONCLUSION

Githa Hariharan is a prolific writer who touches on a variety of themes and plenty of ancient myths in her novels. In order to depict a clear picture of the women's plight all through the ages, she has narrated her stories with the help of mythological examples. Her concern as a feminist writer is rooted in all her novels. But *The Thousand Faces of Night* is the most outstanding work of her in feminist perspective as it elaborates the women's plight over different times. Githa Hariharan expresses that her writing of the novels influenced by her feminizing perspectives so there is the touch of feminism in her novels. Hariharan's female are significant as they are free from fear which encourage them to fight

against the social injustice to them. When women get unequal treatment from the society, feminism arises. When women feel disadvantaged or burdened due to their sex, they open their mouth and stand against the biased society. This give rise to feminism. Through her characterization of brave and open-minded female figures in her prolific novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan has concentrated on gender balances and emancipation and liberty of females in a patriarchal society overburdened by man-made laws to dominate females. Retold from a feminist perspective, the novel represents women attempting to create a new space for themselves. Revisioning the male written myths from female perspective, Githa Hariharan attempts to move towards female emancipation, reinvention of tradition and sedition of man-made laws. The novel reveals the inner spaces, the inner lives of women where most of their dreams are shattered and the only struggle is for survival. Thus, Githa Hariharan makes an attempt to replace the gender stereotype by depicting different females from different generations who make a journey from sacrifice to protest against the gender roles imposed by the patriarchy.

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