

Feminism and Tradition: Binaries in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Indian women writers have always tried to portray an honest attempt to depict the miserable plight of women in an effective way. The progressive elements of feminist ideas and the social status of men and women are thoroughly scrutinized in their works. In this modern era even though we claim that women have attained equal status as that of men, our social, cultural realities still tend to oppress women and many of these are reflected in the writings of many Indian female writers. Githa Hariharan can be thought of as one among them. Her debut novel *The thousand Faces of Night* (1992) depicts the struggle of Indian women for their mere existence. She shows how the couples survive and exist with each other in a social framework of marriage which is totally deprived of love and understanding. It is not just the plight of uneducated woman, but the same applies for even the modern, educated women. Through this article I have tried to make an attempt to bring out the feminist aspects of Hariharan's work.

Keywords- *Feminism, Gender Consciousness, Homeland, Culture*

Introduction

Feminism is not just a single faceted approach. Feminism as a phenomenon has wider implications, whether it is novels or short stories. The feminist consciousness of modern Indian writers can be thought of as a phenomenon revealing the anger and revolt against the entire system. How the Indian writers portray Gender Consciousness is quite different from that of the Western women writers. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is one such novel where the characters tend to question the point of their existence and set out to seek out their own identity in an Indian society which is highly in favour of the patriarchal aspects. Even in the present era of Globalisation, it is alarming that the victimization of women still continues in the Indian society. In the traditional social structure women were neglected and now in the post modern era too the same continues. Githa Hariharan won the Commonwealth Award for her work for masterfully knitting all these elements in her fiction. The novel brings forth the idea how despite the generation, background and education an Indian woman attains, her ultimate fate is to fall back into the century old customs, at least to a small extent. She never will be able to seek out her true identity in this patriarchal society. The Indian society demands a pretention from their woman that they still are obeying and living according to their old customs and beliefs and there seems to be no escape from this mindset of the people.

Dr Padmini and S.K. Sudha puts it:

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).

Through this novel Hariharan has tried to become a voice for Indian women who stay perplexed and who are striving to impart a meaning to their lives. The novel centers around the character Devi, who after her post-tertiary education from America returns to her hometown Madras bearing the memory of her lover Dan. Her characterization is apt as it opens the doors for Hariharan to bring forth the progressive ideas of feminism. She is neither an ideal woman like her mother nor is she spiritually superior as her mother-in-law. Rather, she is portrayed as an ordinary educated woman who has in her all the desires, longings and wishes and ambitions of the society that she is a part of. Never has she tried to make an emotional compromise. Devi is an epitome of the modern Indian women who has in her the consciousness of the past as well as the desire for self-satisfaction. She is torn between the values of her past and the present and this aspect is reflected throughout the novel. Devi does not allow herself to be victimized. Her sense of loss is evident when she tries to adjust

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when she makes a decision to stay with her mother. The true beauty of the novels lies in the social realities that are brought forth through picturesque narration.

The mythological tales and historical stories narrated to Devi by her grandmother had played a vital role in shaping Devi's mental faculty. The novel tends to adopt psycho analytical approach. Feminism, right from the beginning has always been a revolt against the patriarchal society. The status and plight of a woman greatly changes after her marriage. A world of disillusionment awaits for her with her typical arranged marriage. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is such a gripping tale in which we see the typical Indian wife in a modern life, who is forced to cling to her customs and traditions which the society imposes upon her and at the same time she has in her the elements of a modern upbringing that she acquired from her study in America. We see her being told to put away her Veena by her in-laws as they considered her neglecting her duties as a wife. She gives up her passion for music, even though there is a burning flame in her heart she always remain calm and composed. Sita's training prevents her from asserting her individuality here. This is the plight of all the married women in the country. Nobody cares what is going through her mind.

The novel can be considered as a mixture of facts and fantasies telling about love and death, exploring the issues of men and women, passion and loneliness the characters faces in their course of life. Devi's marriage in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is one that was arranged by her mother. We see Devi refusing the marriage offer of her boyfriend Dan just because of her not willing to accept American culture. She was reluctant being of the vast difference in their upbringings and their culture and tradition. Her education in America definitely brings out her sense of liberation for sure, but at the same time had in her the longings for her homeland. We see Devi smoking hashish and being intimate with Dan, which can be thought of as a revolt against her mother for trying to instil in her the typical traditional ideas like advising her to make friends with only people belonging to Brahmin families. But ultimately we see her flying back to her hometown and trying to fulfil her family's honour by marrying the man her mother chooses for her. On her return the force of tradition, culture, mythology all seems to have a collective impact on her. She admires Mahesh for telling the truth about his expectations from their married life but later we see that she has had enough and reached a point where she feels that she no longer can move on. She couldn't even materialise her small wishes like learning Sanskrit. Mahesh had this notion that education can never make a woman happy. He was in need of an obedient wife. Devi's decision to go move out with Gopal can be thought of as a silent reply to her husband for considering marriage just as a social institution and nothing more.

The plight of women is evident in Sita's words "I have often wondered about, those trees, those tender bridal sapling that grew so well side by side. Which I wonder, was the male, which the female?"(59)Sita has been compared to the mythological character Gandhari, who is an embodiment

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of self-sacrifice and self-restrain. The three women that we come across are entirely different in terms of their upbringings and their social circumstances. Mayamma has to bear the tortures from her husband and mother-in-law. Sita's troubles seem more psychological and Devi's troubles are the result of her husband's indifferent attitude towards her which disrupts the control of her life. The toils and frustrations of these three women are portrayed vividly, each of them trying to find out a meaning to their existence desperately in a patriarchal society. Githa Hariharan has brought in the elements of myth too and an understanding of the same will give us a better insight into the problems faced by these women.

Githa Hariharan has masterfully depicted the social reality in our multi-cultural society and in a way has protested against the patriarchal system prevalent in the society. She has put forth the issues of personal as well as cultural in a single framework. She has also brought in the elements of myths and folklores too. We witness Devi humiliating Mahesh and protests by walking out on him.

....You have trampled on your marital vows. I say like Ganga. For that you will be left alone, without wife or child. I will gather together the fragments which pass for my life, however laughably empty and insignificant, and embark on my first real journey.... I can learn to be a woman at last. (*The Thousand Faces of Night*,75)

From this it is evident that Devi has in her the courage to not compromise for anything and to openly speak up for her and the strength to break the shackles of bindings of the society, her grandmother being an inspiration for the same. Devi in the novel depicts "multiple existence" as Shukla Kaushik says. The novel depicts the lives of women belonging to three generations, each bearing the traits of their own tradition and generation. While Devi's grandmother represents the traditional woman, Devi can be considered as a modern woman, Devi's mother stands somewhere in between the two. The stories that Devi listens to from her grandmother, she rewrites it in her own life. Githa Hariharan brings in the elements of myth too from Indian epics from where the main characters seems to have drawn their role models. She depicts how the Indian women can be set free from their bindings with tradition, in which the women are suppressed, forced to accept the values that the patriarchal society forces on them. Devi recognises the intent of her vulnerability and weakness as a woman, in the relationship with Dan and Gopal.

The Thousand Faces of Night was widely appreciated for its attempts to bring out the inner turmoil of women and that too seen from a new light. The fiction was created at the right time when feminism was gaining strength in India. There was a radical change in power shift in the 1990s that ultimately led to the rise of feminism. Feminism has always been a driving force in Gita Hariharan's novels. The protagonist feels that education has not prepared her for "The vast, yawning middle chapters of her womanhood."(54). Gita Hariharan has aptly pointed out various myths of Indian

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womanhood and tried to find answers in a befitting way. Devi's grandmother recounts several mythical tales about many mythological women, their exploits and achievements. We see Devi as a woman who has her own views and aspirations regarding life, which is evident in her personality. We see her questioning in the Prelude that she should have asked her grandmother why. It has been observed that "We find the women depicted in the novel, struggle for their survival and to endure the trials of their womanhood. The means chosen by women might be different but they all are means of survival they could fashion for themselves."(Nawale,203)

Towards the end we witness Devi returning to her mother in order to make a fresh beginning. The future of Devi is a question that has been left unanswered by the novelist. She gives her readers full authority to come to a conclusion regarding the future of Devi. The characters drew in Gita's novel in fact a reflection of the various cross sections of the Indian society. The novelist needs to be credited for her characterization. *The Thousand Faces of Night* constantly changes the expectations of actually what is to be a good wife, a good mother and a woman.

Githa Hariharan has tried to put forth the different aspects of social life along with her depiction of exploitation of women. The social realities are disclosed in an objective manner. The concept that she has tried is a new design of a society from the point of view of a contemporary woman. Devi establishes her individuality by rebelling against the culture, customs and traditions of a patriarchal society. Thus we can say that the novel presents a new woman who showed the courage to break off from the tries of her married life and to seek out a true identity for her. Mahesh, an epitome of Indian men thought of marriage to be just a social responsibility.

Gita Hariharan's novel can be thought of as an endeavour in trying to find out women's human rights. She has absorbed the new change that she happened to witness during her age and tried to incorporate that in her work. We see the three women Devi, Sita and Mayamma in the crunch of patriarchy. The male dominated society wants women to see everything from their own perspective. This aspect has been analysed by the novelist. The women of our age face many problems in our society. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is an exploration of all those problems. Towards the end we witness that Devi's attempt to change the old notions into modern one utterly fails. She stands a victim in a patriarchal society. We see Sita too suppressing her dreams and aspirations for providing a better future for her daughter. It is the women who always have to hold back their dreams and desires, why not men.

The Thousand Faces of Night can be seen as the depiction of a single face of thousand lives. It can be seen as the true face of thousands of Indian women who are caught in the hundreds of year old customs and traditions. The novel bears the odour of our mother's and grandmother's laps and their fragile fingers will once again sooth our tired forehead as we turn the pages of the novel. The novel

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clearly brings forth the idea that a woman meets her fate alone, leaving behind some of the questions unanswered. Gita Hariharan seems to pose the question whether there will ever be a change to this situation or are women really helpless preys to their conditions and is there really a way out, a way to escape from all these dilemmas. In order to liberate herself, woman needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control. Through her female characters she has tried to depict how women survive in a male dominated society, women faces the problems in her life and even survives with her inner strength and female bonding. Gita Hariharan shows how the kind, calm composed women reveals her extraordinary power for her survival.

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