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Cultural Identity and Identity Crisis in the Selected Novels of Githa Hariharan

Dr. Leena V. Phate

Asst. Prof. & Head, Dept. of English,

Jawaharlal Nehru Arts, Commerce & Science College Wadi,

Nagpur, Maharashtra, India

Email id: leenaphate29@gmail.com

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6466-1831>

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan is a successful feminist writer. Her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first novel in 1993. Her novels portray the struggle of female characters for their identities which are challenged by caste, religion, violence and nationality. The present paper is an attempt to examine and review the way Hariharan's women characters encounter the orthodox roles and identity forced on them by the male-dominated social order as they try to rebuild a modern self-identity for them. For this purpose, her novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghost of Vasu Master* and *Fugitive Histories* are thoroughly studied in this paper.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Anthropology, Patriarchy, Inequality, Sociolinguistic, Natality

There are many definitions of the term culture. Some explanations are sociological, psychological, philosophical, and some others are political and historical. Culture as a concept is not so easy to define. Brown states “culture is a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people together” (As cited in Ennaji, Moha, 20). Modern anthropologists are concerned with the relationship between language and culture. People of different languages would have different world views and cultures. According to Hudson for cultural anthropologists, “culture is something that everybody has” (Hudson, 1980: 73). W. H. Oswalt in his book *Life Cycles and Lifeways: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* writes:

In anthropology a culture is the learned and shared behaviour patterns characteristics of a group of people. Your culture is learned from relatives and other members of your community as well as from various material forms such as books and television programs. You are not born with culture but with the ability to acquire it by such means as observation, imitation, and trial and error. (Oswalt, 1986: 25)

Culture can also be observed as a vital part of one's knowledge of the world. Thus, culture may be defined as a multifaceted whole. The major components of culture include language, norms, traditions, customs, the system of beliefs, values, artefacts, knowledge and other habits developed by people.

Concept of Identity

The question of women's identity is one of the debated issues in the present-day women's writing in India. Women's identity is controlled and governed by many actions and beliefs of different ideologies. They make use of woman's life and body. The religion and society try to forge a fixed identity for woman. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition) the word ‘identity’ describes “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others”. In accordance with this definition identity states who the person is and what are the qualities, abilities and talents of that individual irrespective of gender. But this is not the case with women. She is identified by others rather than she is given opportunity to identify herself.

Identity has been a continuous problem for sociolinguistic theory. Though, the term has changed from identity as a problem to the kind of problem that identity is considered. As Saadawi states: "Identity is a discourse, and it is essential to know who is using it, who decides, who labels me, what all this interest in "cultural identity" means, where does it lead [...] I have tried to tell you about my identity [...] But we are so engrossed in defining our identities when they are changing all the time" (1997: 118-126).

Heinz Lichtenstein declares identity is a human need. According to him, “loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity” (78). Woodward has added to the idea of identity that “identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources— from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender [...It] gives us a location in the world and presents the link between

us and the society in which we live [...] Often [it] is most clearly defined by differences, i.e., by what it is not” (Woodward, 1997.1-2).

This diversity of identities includes that people have several social and cultural identities, which they in certain respect combine together. There are some joint identities which are often easily combined for e.g., Anglo- Indian, Franco-German, Afro-American, etc. Hall points out this kind of combined identities, are “Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past [...] identities are the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1990: 223).

According to Fishman identity is “the dynamic relationship between the ancestral heritage, with all its components (oral tradition, literature, beliefs, etc.), and the language(s) which give birth to a specific cultural identity.” Fishman has freshly added the remark that “cultural identity cuts across many fields, extending to all the ramifications [...] for the social, psychological, economic, political, and cultural interactions within and between groups of human beings” (Fishman, 1999:3).

American-German psychologist, Erik Erikson, described identity as a “mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others”. (Erikson, 1959:109) He has explained the theory of psychosocial development of an individual by illustrating eight stages from infancy to adulthood in his ‘Identity and the Life Cycle’. He is also well-known for creating the term ‘identity crises.’

The Thousand Faces of Night

The novel depicts many female characters, both mythical and real. It is a narrative of varied desires and frustrations, wishes and suffering and a quest for identity. Hariharan has used myth and religion to convey the inherent ethos and culture of Indian life. The ethics and custom of the Hindu culture play a great role in this novel. It is a story of three female characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma, and their quest for self-identity. Their hope is very high from the married life but they get the unanticipated distress and disappointment.

In an essay by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen ‘Many Faces of Gender Inequality, he describes, “problems of discrimination against women in the development process, on survivorship differentials between men and women under conditions of social discrimination against women, and on women’s agency in the process of social development” (Sen, 2001). In the essay, Sen gives seven types of inequality: Mortality inequality, Natality inequality, Basic facility inequality, Special opportunity inequality, Professional inequality, Ownership inequality and lastly Household inequality. The difficulties and challenges of women are similar everywhere regardless of their religion, caste and class. Economically, women is not be equal to men, socially also they are deprived of power and culturally they are not given similar treatment. In the patriarchal society, discrimination between men and women is evident in many different forms. Women are not equal to men economically. Culturally also she is not given similar treatment and equal rights as her male counterpart enjoy. Socially also she is deprived of power and decision making within the family.

Characters in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* undergo identity crisis in their married life even after following the norms of the society. "It is a *Mahabharat* of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humanity, arrogance and submission" (Khan, 1995: 135). The three important characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma live in a Hindu cultural society.

In Indian cultural context daughters are traditionally brought up to believe that their parent's home is a temporary place of residence and that the husband's house in due course becomes their home. When a daughter is married, she is treated as an honoured visitor by the parents. But a married daughter when leaves her husband's home forever and returns back to her parent's house it becomes a matter of shame to the family's reputation and a source of despair for them. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* "it is the stifling presence of the mother as a social figure in a patriarchal set up that makes the protagonist question herself" (Ravi, 1999:80). Devi does not succeed to define her identity within the framework of male orientated social structures as a wife in an arrange marriage, or even as a rebellious lover. She elopes with her lover Gopal from the house of her husband and in the end returns to her mother, leaving her lover also. Devi realizes that Dan, Mahesh and Gopal want her to merge herself in their identities. The cultural society in which Devi is brought up wants her to be a good woman to fuse herself with the identity of the man in her life. When Devi realises that men rule the world, in a patriarchal society like India and females are raised in the world with different expectations, she promptly comes out of it, to find her own identity.

Devi finally returns to her mother, "to stay and fight and to make sense of it all," (TFN, 139) and to start from the very beginning. It is in the relationship with her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself. Pradeep Trikha asserts that "in fact her homecoming is her final withdrawal from the male world to stay with her mother, Sita" (Trikha, 1995:172).

Sita, the mother of Devi had to leave her passion for a musical career just to become an ideal daughter-in-law. She is a symbol of sacrifice, a silent sufferer and mute acceptance of the realities of life. She is scolded by her father-in-law for playing the veena and not performing household chores assigned to her. He said, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (P. 30). In the spell of anger, she pulled out the strings of the veena. She responded to her father-in-law as, "Yes. I am a wife. A daughter-in-law" (TFN, 30). Damodar Rao is of the opinion that "in the extended Hindu family, a bride's position is primarily that of a daughter-in-law and not that of a wife. The in-laws and other family members view the newly-arrived bride with suspicion even as she grapples with the new situation and tries hard to come to terms with herself in the changing environment (Rao, 1995:161). Indian women have no individuality and identity of their own. They lack creative space and search for their identity. The Indian woman depends upon her husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law for her survival. Githa Hariharan through the portrayal of Sita's character adds a new aspect to the psychological complexity of Indian women. In a male-dominated society, a woman is

supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker and multifarious roles to play in the family.

Mayamma is a victim of society. She is not educated and is the greatest victim in the novel. She stands for the class of women who agree to everything that happens to them. Such women never complain because of the belief infused in them that the success of life for a woman depends on her ability to tolerate and go on. Mayamma lived all her life trying to satisfy others. The novelist points out the fact that the woman has been taught down the ages to bear without raising any protest to the various atrocities inflicted on her. She has been silenced for ages. Mayamma is ill-treated by her husband first and then by her spoilt son. She accepts her fate and bears the brunt of cruelty in the patriarchal social setup. She is assaulted, when she gets married at the age of twelve to a useless gambler and tortured by her mother-in-law when she is not able to bear a child. There are many statements in the novel that shows the ruthless treatment given to Mayamma by her mother-in-law. “No, No, Maya, no rice for you today. It’s Friday. No rice today, no vegetables tomorrow, no tamarind the day after. Stop thinking of food, daughter-in-law, think of your womb. Think of your empty, rotting womb and pray” (TFN, 114). Mayamma is an example of the humiliation and cruelty imposed upon women by their own gender.

The Ghosts of Vasu Master

In the novel *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, Lakshmi Vasu Master’s mother and Mangala his wife represents the stereotype of traditional Indian women. Both Lakshmi and Mangala are usually committed to household duties. Vasu Master and Mangala lived together for fifteen years but still, he remembers her as a shadowy figure. Mangala gave Vasu Master two sons, Vishnu and Venu, still, he considers her “as a cloudy memory than as a person” (GVM, 41). For Vasu, Master Mangala remains obscure like his forgotten mother. He recalls her personality “Pale and insubstantial; a figure perennially on the retreat. I always saw her in my mind against a vast seashore in the background, the monotonous slosh and thud of waves against rock and sand drowning out all possibility of words” (GVM, 41). Even in the dreams, Vasu master witness Mangala “dressed in silence” and offering him just a “partial view” (GVM, 42). He has no memories of her laughter. Her character always has “the aura of silence (and mystery) that hung about her” (GVM, 42). There is nothing enjoyable and exciting, in her life after marriage. Her life is full of routine activities of mother and wife. She cannot share her desires with Vasu Master, because there is a sense of reverence. “In the Indian tradition the relationship between wife and husband is not like friends but they maintain as God and worshiper” (Patil, 2011:2)

Lakshmi, Vasu Master’s mother is the “sixth daughter of female-weary loins” (GVM, 32). She did not have a name at least a year because the parents had no money to spend on the naming ceremony of one more daughter. They believed that people would laugh at them for their failure to produce a boy year after year. The old sweeper woman who cleaned their backyard and collected the cow-dung tried to comfort her sullen and silent mistress saying that “life would have been easier with a little extra bit of flesh, just a few inches but never

mind, she can still be the Lakshmi of her husband's house" (GVM, 31). Barooach mentions that gender bias is deeply rooted in the culture of India. She says, "Sons are considered ritually and economically desirable, essentially not only to light the funeral pyres of their parents in order to release their souls from the bondage of their bodies but also to ensure the continuation of lineage and family name. They are also expected to become the economic support of, parents in their old age (Barooach, 1999: 24).

According to Jayaprakash A. Shinde, "Githa Hariharan suggests that man always struggle to make woman part of himself, the extension of will. The knowledge that she is 'other than himself' is torture to him" (Shinde, 1999:124). Mangala's character throws light on the personality of the Vasu master as well as on the dominant patriarchal system in India, where women's desires, skills and potential are suppressed and subjugated. Mangala's character represents the socially marginalized woman status in India. The female characters from the novel help us to recognise the confined spaces of Indian women in the socio-cultural hierarchy. They like to live under the male dominance order.

Fugitive Histories

Githa Hariharan's novel *Fugitive Histories* portrays the life of three women living in three different cities. Mala, Sara and Yasmin undergo cultural identity and identity crises in times of violence and religious hatred. The novel is set in the background of post-Godhra riots between Hindu and Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.

Malathi, Mala for short is a south Indian Brahmin. When the novel opens, she is a widow and wants to identify what she is without Asad. She is left alone with the sketches of her husband in Delhi. Even in her childhood, she felt lonely and alienated. She could neither climb the trees like boys nor ride the bicycle because she was a girl. Mala's childhood desire was to be a fearless and joyous child. "What she wanted was to find a place to be in or a thing to do that would set her free from her family, her home and school in the city, her annual summer home in the village" (FH, 14). The novelist through Mala's childhood depicts how a woman's desires are suppressed from her childhood itself. A boy and a girl child are treated differently in a patriarchal society.

Mala cannot live in the prison-house of her grandfather. "I want to be someone else," (FH, 17) says Mala. The tension and hatred further rise when Mala wants to marry Asad, a Muslim. Her parents become hysterical and object to their marriage because he is a Muslim. Her father becomes very furious, "How can you want to marry him...Think of the difference between us and them" (FH, 69). They lament it saying "You're killing us! You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll be lost to us, you'll kill us!" (FH, 69). Mala confidently and strongly marry Asad defying the marriage norms of culture and build a life with him. Mala shapes her identity as a secular woman and builds her career as a librarian.

When mala gives birth to a baby boy many difficulties are involved in naming him. Asad's mother suggests that the boy should be called Ahmed and Mala's mother decides to name him Rama or Krishna and even preferred Ramakrishna "a double dose to help compensate for his half-and-half parentage" (FH, 31). But Mala and Asad have decided they

would call him Samar. Mala then become busy in growing up the child and her suspicion that “she was a half, not a whole, got blunted” (FH, 32).

Sara Zaidi is the daughter of Mala and Asad, half-Hindu and half-Muslim in *Fugitive Histories*. She is a social worker and an aspiring documentary filmmaker working with an NGO in Bombay. She is brought up in a family that believes in secular ideas. A secular inheritance and a mixed parentage make her misfit live in modern India. As an adult both Sara and Samar have to face the dilemma of who they are and whom they will choose to be in future. Sara is facing an identity crisis and wants to know what it means to be a half-Hindu and half-Muslim. “I have Muslim relatives and Hindu relatives. I’m neither”. (FH, 167) Many times she is confused and tries to free herself from these notions. “Sometimes I think I’m Indian” (FH, 167). Sara tries to attach her identity to nationality to get rid of her dilemma. Later her search finds peace and comfort with the self when she says “But most of the time I’m just Sara”. (FH, 167) Anuradha Goyal says that “Though the author has expressed it in the narrow canvas of Hindu Muslim dilemma coming from a mixed parentage, this a dilemma that all the growing up people face who have multiple identities, most commonly faced by children of immigrant”. But Sara, unlike her brother Samar, looks deeper into India’s religious divide and finally tells her mother, “I’m beginning to realize how lucky I am. How glad I am that I’m a hybrid” (FH, 184).

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan, In *Thousand Faces of Night* as Srilata Ravi points out, has attempted to “project a new sense of woman’s identity that transforms her status from the victimized to the empowered by reconceptualising the mother-daughter relationship” (Ravi, 1997:76). Mahesh and Gopal did not succeed in their relationship with Devi because they failed to identify and connect with her soul. Devi in the end rejects mythical stories narrated by her grandmother and role models. She creates a different purpose in her life and finds solace in her relationship with her mother. In *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, both Lakshmi and Mangala live in their permanent abode, (husbands house) and submit to the will of their husband. Female characters in *Fugitive Histories* give the readers a glimpse of different generations and their struggles in society. Githa Hariharan’s novels are dedicated to feminist and social issues. India is a male-dominated society and the woman’s individual self has very little acknowledgement. Githa Hariharan creates a thought-provoking female protagonist who suffers in the institution of marriage. They face different obstacles, difficulties and sufferings while they journey towards self-identity.

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