



Dilemma of Identity in Githa Hariharan's Thousand Faces of Night: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract— *In Thousand Faces of Night Githa Hariharan deals with the struggle of three women (Devi, Sita and Mayamma) of three consecutive generations for their survival, freedom and individuality. The novelist has projected the struggle of women in a male dominated society in order to preserving her identity. These three characters faced humiliations and led unfulfilled life in their early stage of their married life but by the end of the novel all the three tried to see themselves and gave a space for their self. They celebrated themselves as free individuals after they are relieved from their marriage knot. Each individual has responded in her own way to provide space for her 'self'. They walked on the tightrope and struggled for balancing their relations and also for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves.*



Keywords— *Survival, freedom, identity, dilemma, individuality, self*

The Thousand Faces of Night is the first novel of Githa Hariharan published in 1992 and it won Common Wealth Prize in 1993. She wove together the lives of three women belonging to three generations in Madras in the south of India. In *Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan deals with the struggle of three women (Devi, Sita and Mayamma) of three consecutive generations for their survival, freedom and individuality. The novelist has projected the struggle of women in a male dominated society in order to preserving her identity. She has brought out how the women characters search for their own identity while being a traditional inheritor of thousands of duties. The women while trying to justify their given roles seek a place for their self.

Hariharan is successful by showing the struggle of women for self-liberation through her narrative technique of framing texts within the text and her intertextual weaving of Mahabharata and folk stories with lives of real women. The stories are thought provoking and provide a vent into the woman psyche stand on the similar theme that 'a woman meets her fate alone' (Hariharan 28).

Devi, the narrator and protagonist who retells or rewrites stories that she observes or listens from her grandmother and her father-in-law. In course of the novel stories are retold in different ways from gynocentric perspectives. Devi has been fed with several mythical tales about women, their attitudes, exploits and achievements. It is important to note that the grandmother chooses to recount the stories of woman who are not stereotypical females, submissive, self - sacrificing and subdued. Her women are self-directed heroines, who have shown their courage in encountering unpredicted challenges in their lives. As the critic C. Vijayasree states in her article, "Revisionist Myth- making", "a woman is not primarily a wife or a mother but an individual with her own work world cut out for her" (Vijayasree 180).

Devi recollects each of the stories for the better understanding of her predicament. The stories of Amba, Gandhari, Damayanti and others help her to understand the significance of encounter and the implication of standing on her own. Devi is very dear to her grandmother and on her annual visits to her village, her grandmother always

makes her feel very much loved and feeds her on mythological stories. Devi's individuality has been shaped by her grandmother's stories which always highlight a woman's space and individuality. The stories have taught life skills to Devi. Gita Hariharan has used the flashback technique with which the reader has been introduced with a mythological story that describes each phase of Devi's life. Devi is very much fond of her grandmother's stories and likes to be in her company too. Her fascination towards these stories never made Devi miss an annual chance to go to her grandmother's village. Devi is fonder of her Grandmother's stories that only for: heroes and heroines. Princes grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them; love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending. "No question, however fine and giggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own homemade yard sticks for life." (Hariharan20)

Grandmother always interprets life through mythology. The stories are not ordinary bedtime stories, they are chosen for particular occasion, and each story is in reply to each of Devi's childish questions. Her grandmother has an answer for every question. But these answers are not so simple; they have to be decoded.

Devi's questions and her grandmother's observations provide us the universal predicament in understanding Mayamma's, Sita's and Devi's lonely encounters with fate. These women's stories justify grandmother's words: 'a woman meets her fate alone.' Grandmother insists Devi to listen to her stories because 'these stories of men and women who loved, shed blood, and met their deaths as ardently as they lived' (Hariharan 27). But, the stories which her grandmother told to Devi, led her to live in a world of illusion which is full of supernatural beings and unusual adventures.

And most of all, in my memories of those summers, my grandmother's house is crowded with superhuman warriors, men and women destined to lead heroic lives. For many Summers I thrived on a diet of her caressing gnarled fingers and her stories of golden splendor. (Hariharan 27) Devi creates her fantasy world, in which she images herself as "an incarnation of Durga, walking the earth to purge it of fatjowled, slimy-tailed greed." (Hariharan 43)

Devi created her own magical realistic world in which she was a female warrior who "rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads" (Hariharan 41). Devi acquires several magical weapons and a thick armour-like skin from her female mentor.

This is a feminist fantasy of decimating exploitative men -a desire to inhabit autonomous spaces

outside male-ordained enclosures. Devi's idyllic world is shattered when her heroine is killed in battle with a man; Devi's mind is filled with the visions of heroic and virtuous figures as well as demonic ones. Further she imagines herself to be the heroine of a secret land trying to subjugate the evil. 'I lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads' (Hariharan 41). Her imagination runs uprising and eventually she becomes busy making journeys across land and ocean and tries to set things right. I dreamt often of a god-like hero who flew effortlessly across the night sky, and who guided me gently when he saw my own desperate desire to fly with him. I also had recurring nightmares, in which the weightless, smooth gliding I now craved was brought to an abrupt halt, mid-flight. (Hariharan 46)

But Devi's fantasy world has been shattered by her mother Sita's realistic views. It is because her mother does not hold any reverence to noble life of the gods. Thus, she complains about Devi's dreams to her husband, "This has gone far enough. Your picture-books, her feeble-minded fairy stories of gods and goddesses. I want no more of these fantasies. The girl is almost a woman, she must stop dreaming now." (Hariharan 45)

Devi recollects the story of 'Damayanti Swayamvara, at the time of her mother searching for a groom for her. She recollects her grandmother's words that 'you too will live like a princess, (Hariharan 20). Each of every story ends with Devi's numerous questions. The story of Gandhari is recollected when Devi is exploring her mother's life. Her Grandmother praised Gandhari for her will and pride. She compared Gandhari's sacrifice with Devi's mother Sita's sacrificing her love for music. Grandmother says, 'She embraced her destiny—a blind husband—with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood' (Hariharan 29).

But Devi's interpretation to this story is different. Devi perceived that 'her parents are afflicted by a kind of blindness. In their blinkered world they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another' (Hariharan 29). Grandmother's another story has a mythological reference to one of her relatives Uma. Uma is a victim of disaster yet she is courageous and revolutionist like Amba in Mahabharata. With the story Devi has learnt not to bend over to the dire circumstances; which, nevertheless make a woman strong and adamant towards the challenges and finally lead her to victory.

Dev's character reveals 'psychological alienation'. After many proposals Devi's mother Sita fixes Devi 's match with Mahesh and Devi agrees to a negotiated marriage like a good Indian girl by giving

respect to her mother's words. Devi's broad-mindedness, education and experiences challenge many blind beliefs, but she sheds them to fulfil her mother's desire and to uphold the family reputation. Sita arranges face to face interaction with Mahesh and he has honestly confessed that he will be touring most of the time. He also informs her that his father and a maidservant will be there with her and she has to be lonely sometimes. Mahesh says, "I will be in Bangalore only ten days of the month, ... 'Are you ready to accept that? My father is there, of course, and our old maidservant, but you will be lonely sometimes. Have you thought of that?'" (Hariharan 22)

Devi thinks that she could cope with this problem and in fact she admires Mahesh and admits his honesty saying, he needs a woman who will be a wife and mother. In the beginning of her conjugal life, she has her father-in-law's company who fills her mind with the mythical stories and anecdotes of the pious women which tell her that the greatness of an Indian woman always lies in serving her husband. However later on, she realizes that she is unable to cope up with Mahesh's attitude towards marriage and her aloofness, Mahesh's professional tours and other related activities keep him totally preoccupied and he fails to spend time with Devi. This slowly causes emptiness in her heart and leads to 'Psychological Alienation' in her.

While Devi was alone in the absence of Mahesh, her loneliness used to be comforted by her father-in-law Baba. Devi remembers her grandmother while being in the company of Baba. Her father-in-law's stories are aimed at virtues of an ideal wife. Unlike her grandmother stories, they are not ambiguous, but celebrate the womanhood. He tells Devi that a woman can also lead her man to spirituality and could also excel her husband by leading a virtuous life (*pativratyam*). Devi thinks her grandmother's stories are prelude to her womanhood whereas his stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. She further understands that, "his stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife." (Hariharan 51)

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always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife (Hariharan 51) As a Sanskrit scholar, he could quote endlessly from Sanskrit scriptures on feminine virtues and a woman's position in society. 'All men, droned Baba, are enjoined to cherish women, and look after them as their most precious wards. Listen,' he said, and I waited for his voice and face to be elevated, taken back in time to the unambiguous, magisterial days of Manu.' "Fathers, brothers, husbands and brother-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honored, there the Gods delight, where they are not honored, there all acts become fruitless" (Hariharan 65). And 'Women,' said Baba, 'have always been the instruments of the saint's initiation into Bhakti' (Hariharan 65) And 'you see it takes the wife's flame of dharma to light within a man, the divine lamp that is rusting with neglect' (Hariharan 66).

The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honored in the heavens. On the death of her husbands, the chaste wife, established in continence, reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practiced self-control. (Hariharan 55) Her father-in-law appears to be good and teaches Devi how to be a good wife. The irony is that Baba's wife has forsaken him and the children to go in search of God. The servant maid Mayamma reveals the fact that his wife, Parvatamma felt suppression in his company and left home in search of independent salvation. Mayamma tells the story of Parvatamma that she has gone in search of god after she has fulfilled her household duties. She has written a letter to her husband in his absence and handed it over to Mayamma and left home. As a free individual she has directed her path. She has been successful in knowing what she is and what she wanted. And thus, she has left home forever for her only death is a 'home-coming'. Devi compares Parvatamma with her grandmother and finds Parvatamma is an enigma. Devi thinks, 'Parvatamma had been more ambitious. She had, like a man in a self-absorbed search for a god, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder' (Hariharan 64). It took long time to Mayamma to forgive Parvatamma for her faithless attitude. But Devi has understood parvatamma predicament after listening to Baba's Manu inspired stories that woman has also got the right to seek spiritual salvation.

Baba's stories advance a woman's role in bringing salvation in husband's life. He insists that a woman can attain spiritual realm with her chastity and virtue. With the story of Jayadeva, Baba has told Devi that man has to see the spiritual light in one's wife and that is

what exactly happened in the life of Jayadeva. While Jayadeva was writing Gita Govinda, his wife has got the fortune to see the God Vishnu which is a boon denied to him.

Devi has recollected the story of Ganga when she is decided to leave Mahesh without a child. Devi did not understand why her grandmother told the story but Devi understood it when the time comes to leave her husband without a child. Ganga marries the king Santhanu on condition not to ask whatever she does. Each year Ganga bears a son and drowns the baby in the river. She tells the king that what she is doing is only for the infant's welfare. But the king stops her at the eighth baby and thus Ganga leaves the king with the son for his fate.

Devi did exactly as Ganga wanted to humiliate and desert Mahesh without a child. As Devi is fed up with Mahesh's nagging for a son Devi thinks 'You have trampled on your marital vows, I say like Ganga. For that you will be left alone, without wife and child, (Hariharan 95). Devi understood the inner meaning of her grandmother's story that 'to be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to earn the title, just as you have to renew your wifely vows every day. (Hariharan 89)

Devi has her own opinion and aspiration regarding her life. This attitude towards the life can be observed in her personality. Those stories have never given a thought back when she has taken her own decision to protect her individuality. Therefore, Devi says in the Prelude to the novel, "I must have asked grandmother why? Thousands of times?" (Hariharan 75) Githa Hariharan has illustrated this fact in her novel and it has been observed the women depicted in the novel, struggle for their survival and to endure the trials of their womanhood. The ways chosen by the women might be different but they all are means of survival.

The novel having the colours of feminism deals with the lives of these three women who belong to different generations and experience hardships despite their attempt to lead lives of ideal women. These three characters faced humiliations and led unfulfilled life in their early stage of their married life but by the end of the novel all the three tried to see themselves and gave a space for their self. They celebrated themselves as free individuals after they are relieved from their marriage knot. Each individual has responded in her own way to provide space for her 'self'. They walked on the tightrope and struggled for balancing their relations and also for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* shows how the women are torn between tradition and modernity in trying to shape their lives in their own ways

and, in doing so, recalls and reinterprets the great myths recorded in Sanskrit - the Mahabharata and the Ramayana - to show changes in the relationship between the sexes. Hariharan's technique of story-telling is to restore the lost Indian tradition and how women in Indian myths lived and could assert themselves their place in society. Hariharan's use of citing mythological stories in which the dynamism and the women identity have been celebrated; in turn she inter-related the stories to the woman characters while confronting challenges in their life. As a matter of fact, the 'Thousand Faces' may be referred as 'Thousand Thoughts' that highlights the concept of "living for one self." Githa Hariharan has given a hint to the reader that bondage of marriage is one of the obstacles for a woman to retain her 'self.'

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