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New Concerns and Survival Strategies of a Woman in Githa Hariharan's

The Thousand Faces of Night

Abstract

Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night" is her debut novel which won 1993 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The plot of the novel revolves round protagonist Devi and her experiences of reality as opposed to the world of fantasy and 'illusion', a world of make-belief where she lives from her childhood. Her grandmother was the endless stream of folk and fairy tales and stories from Indian mythology. Woman writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and some others are projected the contemporary life of women in the Hindu society. In their works, they are portraying mainly the two generations of woman, the submissive and humble who could be tamed accordingly, and the radical new woman who questions the contemporary social system.

Index cited: survival strategies, world of fantasy, new concerns, dominating society, new woman

Author's Biography:

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According to Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, women have always been seen as the “... other” (Simone Beauvoir, 26). In *The Second Sex* she says, “... The duality between self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies” (Simone Beauvoir, 26).

Introduction:

In literature, feminism has a multifaceted approach. It has touched almost all paths of life revealing its progressive elements in varied forms of literature, fine arts and culture. Feminism as a phenomenon has wider ramifications, both in short stories and novels. In the coeval modern literature, both in the west and the east, feminism has affected various dimensions in an interesting manner. Feminism has reflected upon women's aspirations, their rights and responsibilities with a new progressive aspect. Mostly Indian women writers have aptly described identity crisis in Indian life. The feminist consciousness of modern women writers in India is a unique phenomenon revealing anger, grief and revolt against the system. The women writers have tried to reveal dilemma and conflict of the inner mind of Indian womanhood. The study of emerging images of women is a core reflection of Indian women's writings. Gender consciousness of Indian women writer is distinctly different from that of the western women writers. How Indian women writers respond to feminism could be examined by conducting case study of Indian women writers. In this work, writings of Githa Hariharan have been studied with a feminist perspective. In the present chapter Githa Hariharan's ice breaking novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* which is a true revelation of identity crisis of Indian women has been dealt with. This chapter portrays

Githa Hariharan's attempt in presenting reality of the women of today's generation and their composite portrait has their own reality.

A female child is taught to follow the guidelines that are there for woman. The women are always seen as wooden doll in the hands of the male dominating society. The modern women are trying to reject to be the model women and becoming a new woman. The term "New Woman" was coined by a British writer and public speaker, Sarah Grand in 1894. Sarah Grand was a member of the woman writer's Suffrage League and an activist and feminist. This term, "New Woman", soon became a popular phrase in books and newspapers in England.

The duty of a wife quoting refers to Manu-smriti in the following words by R. P. Sharma, in his *Woman in Hindu Literature*: "... Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. No sacrifice, no vows, no fast must be performed by women apart from their husbands, if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted to heaven" (128).

In contemporary Indian literary cover myths are returned to highlight sacred beliefs of the Hindus. They provide background to the contemporary reality, understanding of the Indian social structure and system as they highlight every experience and emotion of man. Indian women novelists, influenced by the women's liberation movement, have brought to light the injustice and measure to women by the patriarchal society. These novels have a feminist flavor with a woman as the central character who rebels against the existing social set up.

There are characters in literature who, either live in the conventional old style or are a combination of the old and the new. New Woman is marked by her struggle for identity and attainment of individual aspirations.

The term “**New Woman**”, stands for the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. She is conscious of her individuality. The new woman has been trying to avail her rights as a human being. She is fighting for equal treatment with men. The educated woman’s individuality has been matured.

Githa Hariharan expresses her angry protest through the character Devi, the protagonist of *The Thousand Faces of Night* who emerges as a New Woman who is true to herself. It is a story of Devi’s quest for self-image.

This novel is structured around the sexual and marital experiences of Devi, Sita and Mayamma. The novelist highlights Devi’s experience by interspersing with events related to Sita’s and Mayamma’s personal lives. Devi’s failure to become a mother becomes a crucial factor in her development as an individual. But she is not like Mayamma, the old care-taker; she liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play. Her self-fulfillment does not lie in bearing and rearing of children, but she wants to recognize her own inherent potential to live with herself on more positive terms.

Devi’s husband, Mahesh, goes in long-tours for weeks together on business. More than his absence, it is his coldness that leaves Devi utterly dejected. Devi’s marital life lacks the excitement that she had expected. Her husband compares her with other women who are not well educated, diminish her self-esteem: “this is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn’t she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want?” (Githa Hariharan, 74) “..... He is far too civilized to raise his hand and bring it down on my rebellious body. He snarls instead about women’s neuroses and my faulty upbringing.”(74) When Mahesh awaits news of her pregnancy, her repeated Cool response is, “..... —no news. “She remains —... all bones and

flat stomach.” (GithaHariharan,86) To him, Devi does not seem to hunger for motherhood. Mahesh’s self-conceit receives a blow and frustrate him.

Mahesh has everything a young lady can dream of an executive job, a palatial house in Bangalore and enormous riches. She is provided with everything but she finds that something is lacking in her life. His cold and indifferent attitude risks her. Devi feels cheated. The needed emotional support earlier, she used to get from her mother. She feels that marriage is a misery: “I am still a novice in the subtler means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, ... The games it plays with me are ignominious ... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (GithaHariharan, 54)

The novel revolves around a number of stories, fables and myths. The use of myth in these stories helps the author to present the relevance of the literary heritage across the times and even in the post-modern era. She makes inter-textual links, P. Geetha explores, “... to explore and highlight heritage. This use of literary heritage deliberates its continued relevance across time. Epics, legends and stories in these postmodern novels function as resources and stimulants for clarifying the ethos and culture of the native land. (P. Geetha,54)

Devi’s grandmother narrates the mythological stories that have initiated her into the numerous covered secrets of womanhood. The stories are significantly placed after situations by grandmother that calls for mythical clarification so that Devi can derive the desired meaning. These stories become relevant of her life that Devi thinks she is the very incarnation of all the revenge deities. Marriage to Mahesh and his cold and indifferent behavior brings an end to the dream-like life of Devi. She has heard many stories of harassment at the hands of husbands, but she is not prepared for this kind of treatment from her husband. Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba

and suffers like the snake woman of her grandmother's stories. It is said that the novelist, Ferrets out the struggle of Indian women in her affiliation with society and man for the sake of preserving her identity. The novel brings alive the underworld of Indian women's lives "..... where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival." (Tripathi, 169)

Devi's grandmother remains more on negligible figures like Ganga, Amba and Gandhari who protested against exploitation in their own ways. Amba is a female avenger who transforms her hatred for Bheeshma, who has been denied of her feminine gratification by Bheeshma, transforms her hatred into sweet revenge and glorious triumph. Gandhari hides her anger behind a thick bandage for eyes for marrying a blind man. Her grandmothers say that "In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing... her lips straight and thin with fury. Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman ... She embraced her destiny – a blind husband – with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood." (Githa Hariharan, 29)

Gandhari's blindfold is her protest against an injustice imposed on her by getting her married to Dhritrashtra. Devi draws a poetic equivalent of Gandhari's covering eyes with that of her own parents. "In their blinkered world, they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another." (Githa Hariharan, 29) When the terms of marriage are broken, Ganga drowns her children and walks out of marriage. All these women- Amba, Gandhari and Ganga- represent female determination. Devi sees the parallel between the lives of mythical figures of female virtue and that of her mother and finds her mother's humbleness is meaningless. She also acknowledges, "That it could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life." (Githa Hariharan 29) There is a queer love-hate relationship that Devi shares with her grandmother's stories. Though she does not fully agree with the stories, her life becomes nasty the moment the mythical sustenance is degraded

Devi listens to the stories of ideal women protagonists' like Sita, Gandhari, snake woman, and Parvati who follow their husband's words, and the stories of cruel women like Amba and Kritiya who take their revenge on their husband.

Devi recollects all the mythical stories told by her grandmother and she makes subtle comparison between the apt and wonderful lives of the mythological heroines and depraved stories of real women around her. Devi opines; "..... In my grandmother's mind, the link between her stories and our own lives was a very vital one." (Githa Hariharan, 30) It reveals the physical, psychological and emotional maturity that shows Devi's perspective of entrance into the world of women. Due to long tours of her husband and total absence of physical attention, Devi spends sleepless nights, aching for a—... blissful numbness." (Githa Hariharan, 78) She finally decides "..... I must learn to love" (Githa Hariharan, 78) and walks out on Mahesh.

Devi's infertility reduces her place in the family. She feels lonely and attracted towards Gopal who is a Hindustani classical singer and her neighbor. Gopal's music in spire's her and allure's her when she is becoming abrupt due to her husband's neglect. Devi's suffering precedes with multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge, for a strong sense of injustice. She feels exhausted and plans to escape. She has her own understanding of her helplessness. She plans to take revenge. "..... I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act – humiliating Mahesh saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with." (Githa Hariharan, 95)

Devi does not listen to her grandmother's mythical tales silently. She is thirsty to know the why of every possibility. This shows an intellectual quest of Devi who desires for a prudential answer. Mayamma, on the other side, firmly believes that women are not supposed to ask questions. She

even advises Devi to be careful when she asks her next question. This is so because Mayamma asked a question only once in her life and the answer she got silenced her for her life time. But Devi gains wisdom by questioning her grandmother. She does not merely learn the stories, she feels the stories should be revised and retold. Retelling a story of the past would shift into an act revival of a lost tradition. Divyarajan says, “—It is through these subtle allusions, myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crises of identity.” (Bahugana, 1)

Devi passes through a complex process of identity crisis by refusing an offer of marriage from her black American friend Dan. She returns to India for the sake of her widowed mother. In India she got married to Mahesh. Devi failed to dedicate her identity as a wife in an arranged marriage. As a rebellious lover to Gopal, Devi finally returns to her mother to start life from the beginning.

Conclusion:

This paper has attempted a critical analysis of elements in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. There has also been an attempt to thoroughly explain certain features in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The most significant aspect of it is that the author has been successful in crafting the novel effectively, particularly on the basis of feminism. Initially, the background is given regarding the rise of Githa Hariharan as a novelist. Further, the feminist approach of Githa Hariharan is properly pinpointed. The specific study of myths and lore has also been conducted. A special focus on patriarchy and marriage relationship in India is given from the literary sociological perspective. Further, the four important characters in the novel are described. The struggle between tradition and modernity is also depicted. The discourse analysis based on three aspects is properly conducted. The whole chapter analyzes the success of Githa Hariharan as it appears in *The Thousand*

Faces of Night. Her Gifted pen has taken a new colour of progressive ideas. Her keen observations of life and pains and splendor have affected unsuspecting wonders. Thus, the study of this novel shows that it is a new beginning and new era for mirroring pains of Indian women portrayed in three parts of novel, woven together effectively.

Thus, the present article is connecting, myth and reality, fact and fantasy which call attention to the female experience in a male dominated Indian society. Hariharan shows in her novel, how the process of serfdom of woman is interwoven with the social life.

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