

Gender and Myth in Githa Hariharan's the Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

The women writers talk about the multifaceted sufferings of Indian women regardless of their age, caste, class and educational status. Their problems in love, sex and marriage is also being portrayed with greater confidence. These themes are expressed by Githa Hariharan with the help of Indian Mythology. Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* scrutinizes these themes by featuring the lives of three main characters Mayamma, Sita and Devi who belong to different generations. Indian Myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabharatha have been beautifully used by Hariharan in her *The Thousand Faces of Night*. She doesn't stop with that, but also relates them to the women characters of the novel.

KEYWORDS: gender issues, culture, myth, oppression

Introduction

India is civilizing along with its great tradition and heritage. The ethnicity of the country is abundant with lot of myths. In spite of many religions and linguistic variations, everyone live in harmony. India is a land where great saints and Rishis had lived teaching people the art of living. It also has a rich heritage of literary tradition. It is here where the Great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha were produced which invariably preaches the principles of life.

Indian writers are smart enough to use their passion of writing to create awareness among people and also to universalize the ethnic culture of India. The women writers of India used writing as a powerful tool to focus on the status of women in Indian society and to portray the different facets of women. Feminist concerns expressed that Indian writing is distinctively Indian. Dr. Maitrayee Chaudhry, professor of Social Studies in JNU observes that, "The Indian feminist is debating in part within the 'national' context on 'local' issues, even as she is part of the contemporary globalization of academia and of feminist scholarship" (15).

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Also, the novel highlights how the factors of oppression are carried forward by culture and tradition from one generation to another. All the women characters in the novel have been caught in the clutches of cultural stereotypes and are unable to transgress the bounds. In all the socio-cultural settings, there are predefined roles for

either sexes and women are immensely prejudiced. Dr. Amy Blackstone a professor in sociology, opines in her article on Gender Roles and Society that,

“Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behaviour is believed to be appropriate for what sex. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society’s beliefs about differences between the sexes.” (335).

The victims are bound to play various roles demanded by culture and society against their own will. Feminist concerns expressed that Indian writing is distinctively Indian. Dr. Maitrayee Chaudhry, professor of Social Studies in JNU observes that, “The Indian feminist is debating in part within the ‘national’ context on ‘local’ issues, even as she is part of the contemporary globalization of academia and of feminist scholarship” (15). The *Thousand Faces of Night* depicts such cultural constraints on women’s lives in a unique Indian context. Sita, Mayamma and Devi are microcosms of the Indian womanhood in totality. Sita, who represents the second generation is married to Mahadevan at a very young age and gives birth to Devi. She strives to fit into the definition of a 'pativratha' or loyal wife by sacrificing the self to fulfil her familial duties. The image of ideal woman requires sacrifice, as a prototype for the virtuous good-woman, Sita deprives herself of good food. She eats the leftover chappatis after everyone in the family finishes dinner, Sita “ravenously eating the chapattis left over from dinner (103).” She discards her passion for playing veena during her leisure for there is no leisure to an ideal housewife amid her endless duties to others.

Apart from being an ideal wife and a daughter in law, Sita proves to be an epitomic mother figure. She raises Devi with the absolute care and provides foreign education after Mahadevan's death. She marries off Devi to a well settled groom, Mahesh. Though educated in the USA, Devi consents to the marriage arranged by her mother. After marriage, Devi's life turns to be monotonous as her husband Mahesh fails to provide her the emotional support that she needs. He demands her to mimic the ideal model of an Indian housewife by insisting her to take care of domestic works and have a child. So, she seeks solace from an extra marital affair with a famous classical singer, Gopal Verma. Frustrated with him too in a short time, she returns to her mother in Madras. Though Devi breaks off from cultural bounds at the end, she is conscious of cultural restrictions imbibed in her. When her black American friend Dan makes a marriage proposal, she declines it on cultural grounds inspite of her love for him.

Along with the stories of these main characters, the story of Mayamma, Devi's maid, runs in parallel. Mayamma, an uneducated poor woman endures brutal treatment from her husband and mother in law. Mayamma accepts all the violence unleashed upon her and remain passive because she has been culturally educated that women should only obey and not to react. Later in life, Parvathiyamma, Devi's mother in law employs her as a housemaid. All these women are subjected to socio cultural impositions and helpless to expose their real feelings.

The novel has juxtaposed the lives of mythical women with the real-life women who are expected to precisely imitate mythical virtues. The image of an ideal Indian woman has its entrenched root in mythology. Prof. Robert A. Segal Jung in his *Encountering Jung: Jung on Mythology* points out Jung's words that myth is the

inspiration to human mind, and the best medium for conveying the unconscious “Myth is the primordial language natural to these psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery” (22).

Devi's grandmother raises Devi telling her the myths of Gandhari, Amba and Ganga. But, the grandmother's versions of these myths are radically different retellings of the actual stories. In her version of myths, women are not happy and content about their sacrifices. They at least react to the oppressions and show their passive resistance though not active rebellion.

When Devi's grandma retells Gandhari's story from Mahabharata, she unearths the reality that Gandhari's blindfold is not because of love for her husband but a passive resistance due to the frustration after knowing that her husband is blind. She interprets the myth differently as,

“he turned around, she saw the white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless.’ . . . In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing. But she tore off a piece of a thick red skirt and tied it tightly over her own eyes. She groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury” (29).

This modification of myth has resulted from her own frustration of being a submissive wife all her life. In actual myth, Gandhari's blind folding is glorified as a highest virtue but grandma's version subverts it as an outcome of her disappointment of marrying a blind man without her knowledge. Grandma's retelling represents reality in which sacrifice and self -destruction are not innate virtues of the fair sex. In another instance, she tells Devi the famous myth of Nala-Damayanti which figures in Mahabharata.

Damayanti's character is well known for her devotion to her husband. In the traditional myth, she is represented to be virtuous, pure and chaste. But Devi's grandmother calls her “cunning.” In grandma's perspective, Damayanti deceives other princes by her cunningness so that she is not virtuous but strategic who is capable of manipulating things for her own good unlike the ideal prototypes who destroy themselves in order to please others.

In the words of Grandma, Damayanti is nothing more than being cunning. Indeed, grandma doesn't relegate Damayanti's cunningness to cheap deceit but is assertive on the fact that women act wisely to make the circumstances suitable for their own well being.

Another notable aspect regarding myth is that the novel presents polarized interpretations of myths by both female and male. It's not only Devi's grandmother telling her mythical stories but also her father in law Baba tells Devi ancient myths. Notably, there is a stark contrast between these female and male versions of myths. Baba, a pedantic sanskrit scholar mimic the stories as they are told traditionally. On the contrary, Devi's grandma twists them by infusing reality into it because imitating the prejudiced and misogynist myths in real life keeps women in a perpetual psychological trauma. Male's interpretation of myth is a romanticized fantasy whereas female interpretation of the same is a radical reality. Devi herself dichotomizes the difference, “Baba's stories remind me of my grandmother's, but

they are also different. They are less spectacular, they ramble less. Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities” (51). Hence, retelling serves to be a vital tool to express suppressed realities.

Therefore, *The Thousand Faces of Night* portrays the different facets of women with the help of myth and the factors of oppression that are carried forward by culture and tradition from one generation to another. The novel ends with the insistence on self-companionship.

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