

THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT: A READING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIAN MYTHS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

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Abstract:

Gita Hariharan's debut novel The Thousand Faces of Night, first published in 1992, articulates the problems of women with the help of Indian Mythology. This novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993. In this novel, she links the plight of her women characters with the Indian myths such as Ramayana, Mahabharata etc.. Indian mythology is connected with the stories about gods, goddesses and even the legendary heroes mentioned in the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. The myth collections are called Puranas. The term 'Myth', used in English is derived from the greek word 'Mythos' meaning 'Word' or 'Speech'. It is a system of "Hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do to provide a rationale for social customs and observations." (Abrams)

Gita Hariharan, being born and brought up in a traditional Hindu family might have been acquainted with all these myths and she perfectly blended the myth and reality in The Thousand Faces of Night. These stories were instrumental in supporting the insidious patriarchal concept.

Key words: *myths, gender, feminism, female narrative*

The story of *The Thousand Faces of Night* revolves around three women characters—Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook. The story of these women tells us about the society's patriarchal pattern. The society's expectations and the taboos laid by men of the world are vividly portrayed. 'Story within a story' is the narrative technique which Hariharan employs within the novel. To substantiate her stories, she uses mythological allusions from the great epics of India, and to symbolise the endless struggle of womanhood.

Devi, the central character of the novel, is born in a traditional Brahmin family. Devi went to the US on a scholarship to do her Master's. She is portrayed as a young, educated girl with her "american experience." She grew up among the stories and myths narrated to her by her grandmother. Both psyche and politics play an important role during her development. As a curious child, Devi queries about the conditions of women around her. Grandmother always makes her understand her inquiries through storytelling. These stories are decoded and a moral was always drawn out:

“My grandmother’s stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out”(27).

So, in her very childhood, Devi is socially conditioned to achieve the idea of ideal womanhood. These myths constitute the fabric of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, and through these stories, Devi retrieves the marginal figures of Gandhari, Amba and Ganga—which relate to their minority status, almost forgotten and often rendered silent and invisible in patriarchal version of myths. As Devi grows older, she begins to draw a link between the stories of her grandmother and the real life stories around her. Devi’s curious mind reveals indirectly that the myths and the epics need to be reviewed and reinterpreted from the humanist point of view. Instead of being completely conditioned by the cultural influence, she tries to find the way out. As she grew older, she begins to see that the problem lies in finding the suitability of ideal mythical characters in the contemporary society. While commenting on such situations, Devi once speaks thus:

“I must have, as I grew older, begun to see the fine cracks in the bridge my grandmother built between the stories i loved, and the less self-contained, more sordid stories I saw unfolding around me. The cracks I now see are no longer fine, they gape as if the glue that held them together was counterfeit in the first place. But the gap I now see is also a debt: I have to repair it to vindicate my beloved storyteller” (30-31).

Later, when she came of age, Devi’s mother decided to marry her off to Mahesh, a regional manager of a multinational firm at Bangalore, whose job demands long tours. Nurtured with the mythological stories of her grandmother, Devi dreams of a “Swayamvara” for herself. Devi recollects her grandmother’s story of Damayanti that was taken from Mahabharata. Nala, the king of Nishad was handsome brave and virtuous. Damayanti’s father decided to hold her Swayamvara . She was brave and determined to espouse Nala. So she threw the garland around his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the Gods. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral: “ A woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning”(20). The story of Nala- Damayanti fascinated her. From this story, Devi understood the concept of Swayamvara.

However the marriage proves wrong later on. Neither Devi nor Mahesh has any interest in making the marriage work. Her relationship with her husband is marked by loneliness, silence and discontent. Mahesh is more of a businessman than an ideal husband. Lack of communication stifles and chokes her voice and disintegrates her sensibility. Later in the novel, Devi is fascinated by an Indian singer Gopal for his sincerity and devotion to work. She elopes with Gopal in order to take revenge of Mahesh and that decision was taken less for love than to show her rage of rejection of a demeaning marriage that had crushed dignity, individual aspiration and mocked her emotional imaginative refinement. With Gopal, she again gradually develops the same sense of void as he does not recognize her individuality. Devi is yet to reach her destination and carve out a niche for herself. Once again she protests and craves for survival on her own. Therefore, in the end she realizes that she is tired of drifting between the worlds like a floating island searching for props. She seeks to find her own authentic ‘self’ and secure

some firm holding of the mainland. She goes back to her mother in search of her roots. She passes through variegated relations till she establishes a contact with her real self and takes a step to attain equipoise. Thus *The Thousand Faces of Night* is the story of Devi's quest for a self-image. Having failed to define her identity as a wife or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns to her mother, — to stay and fight, to make sense of it all ...(139) and to start from the very beginning. It is in her relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself.

The next story narrated by her grandma is about Gandhari who plays a significant part in the Mahabharata. Gandhari was married to a very rich prince, whose Palace was “twice as big, twice as magnificent as her parents palace” (28). On all the ways he is very rich and “the marble pillars shone like mirrors” (28), whereas on meeting her husband for the first time in such a rich palace, she was taken aback for “the white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless” (29). Gandhari in anger vowed never to see again the world; so she bound her eyes with the help of a veil. Summing up the story Devi's grandmother says: “she embraced her destiny— a blind husband— with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (29). Through this story Devi learnt life through her grandmother's choice of Gandhari and acclaims:

“The lesson brought me five steps close to adulthood. I saw, for the first time, that my parents too were 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”. (29)

Gandhari's story once again reflected the life of Sita, Devi's mother. Before Marriage her parents taught her to play veena. She entered her husband's house with a veena as part of her dowry. After completing the household affairs, which was considered as the foremost duty of the housewives, she used to play veena. One day her father-in-law called her for performing some works before puja in the morning. She did not hear, as she was playing veena. The father-in-law scolded Sita. “Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law” (30). In an anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play the veena again and replied in a whisper: “yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law” (30).

The role played by society imposing the virtues epitomizing the ideal womanhood can clearly be seen in the character of Sita. Society allows enough freedom to men to develop their self-whereas women have to struggle at different stages while also bearing the responsibilities. They face difficulties at different emotional and physical levels. This social conditioning creates hurdles in self-development. Her life is controlled by some other entity, the social system. In her childhood, Sita, the mother of Devi, has the ambition to become a veena player. With efforts she achieves her aim. Though she is not beautiful, yet she makes up by excelling in music and other domestic chores. After marriage she finds herself in a different world where different duties are expected from her as a daughter-in-law. Once when she gets rebuked from her father-in-law that she is not an ideal daughter-in-law, she pulls out the strings of veena in order to achieve that so-called ideal womanhood. She suppresses her desire and devotes all her time and energy to save the family's prestige and honour with order, reason and progress.

Another significant story told her by her grandmother deals with a beautiful girl who married a snake. Although Devi's immature mind cannot decode the real purpose underlying the story, it etched in her memory as a story throughout her life. A childless couple prays to God for a child and in return a snake is born to them. When the snake grew up, the parents planned a marriage. The father walked to the distant lands in search of a bride. When the host learns that he is in search of a girl for his venom tongued son who is in the shape of a snake, he readily offered his gorgeous daughter. The girl on seeing the snake as her husband, wholeheartedly accepted her lot, saying "A girl is given only once in Marriage" (33). One night the serpent came into her room and spent a night with her. Next morning when she woke up, surprisingly she found a handsome young man on her bed. The story delineates the Hindu concept of rebirth. Devi co-relates the story with the lot of the servant maid, Gauri.

As the grandmother grew older, stories also took a new shape. "The grandmother's stories became sharper, more precarious tone of dangerous possibilities" (35). This time grandmother dwells upon Mahabharata for a story and she talks about Amba. Prince Bheesma goes to a swayamvara of three beautiful princesses— Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Amba the eldest chose King Salwa and garlanded him. But suddenly Bheeshma kidnapped all the three princesses and took them to his step-mother. When they came to know that Amba was already married, they let her go to King Salwa. Unfortunately Salwa refused to accept her and insulted her:

"Do you think I feast on Left overs? I am a king. I do not touch what another man won in battle. Go to Bheeshma. He won you when his arrow struck my eager hands on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me?" (37)

Insulted Amba goes back to Bheeshma, who also refused to accept her thereby she changed her attitude towards life and vowed to avenge Bheeshma. She went to the forest and did penance towards Lord Shiva. Having been pleased with her penance, Lord Shiva gave her a garland and promised her: "Whoever wears this garland will surely kill Bheeshma" (39). This story reared a brave attitude in Devi. "She day-dreamed more and more about female avengers" (40). These lessons indelibly imprint themselves in her mind. She confesses: "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." (41).

The most interesting story which has a message of motherhood is about Ganga and Shantanu. She says "Motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast" (88). On walking along the bank of Ganges, King Shantanu happened to meet a beautiful damsel. He fell in love with her and in turn she had promised to marry him, provided he did not intercept her in her actions. However difficult, he accepted it. No sooner did she give birth to a child than she killed it drowning in river Ganges. She killed seven children. Shantanu could not approve of such conduct, but he remained silent for holding up the vow. Upon the birth of the eighth child, he could not refrain protesting her from drowning the child. The lady goes back to her normal form—river Ganges, saying: "Then take him, be the father and mother to him" (88). She plunged into the river.

There is a belief in the Hindu mythology that the water of Ganges purifies us of our sins for it flows from heaven. The lady plunged into the river to wash away her sins. After many years Devi could interpret the story and concludes: “To be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to renew your wifely vows everyday” (88).

After marrying Mahesh, Devi meets her father-in-law, Baba and the caretaker-cum-cook in that home, Mayamma. The emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba. Her relationship with Baba becomes stronger. He was a Sanskrit professor, an intellectual man. He narrates some stories about womanhood, and the wifely vows and duties in a household. Devi compares his stories with that of her grandmother. She avers: “her stories are a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities” (51). While analysing Baba’s stories Devi says: “They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife”. (51). Baba talks about Manu, who is the creator of Hindu code of conduct. He teaches Devi what Brahminhood is. He tells Devi quoting from Manu, “A Brahmin shrinks from honors as from poison; humility he covets as if it is nectar” (52). Baba dwells deep on the Vedas and Sanskrit hymns. Devi feels glad to be a disciple of such an intellectual man.

Mayamma, one of the main characters of the novel, provides another version of a women’s existence. The novelist uses the technique of juxtaposing the past with the present when the life of the lonely Mayamma, after Devi had left her husband and Mahesh was on tour, is interspersed with her recollections of her past to provide us with an insight into her battered, violence-filled existence. Mayamma’s painful story of her survival is told repeatedly. Mayamma’s memory goes back to her own marriage. Mayamma was an old caretaker cum cook of Devi’s in-law’s house. She gets married at an early age of twelve and that too, with a useless drunkard and gambler who came to her every night, for physical pleasure alone. She knew no happiness in marriage. Mayamma survived her long suffering life as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Her mother-in-law, unable to check Mayamma’s insides, had to content herself with the astrologer’s promise that Mayamma would bear her many strong grandsons. And, “She watches Mayamma’s slim waist intently for the first year and second year, she breaks into complaints” (80). Her mother-in-law’s abuse is habitual throughout Mayamma’s married life. When Devi asks Mayamma “Why she had put up with her life;? she laughs till tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks and tells her story teasing Devi’s childishness:

“I can see that you are still a child, she said. When I lost my first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear, I screamed, for the only time in my life, Why? The oily, pockmarked village doctor, his hand still dripping with my blood, looked shifty. A woman must learn to bear pain, he mumbled. What can I do about the sins of your previous birth? But my mother-in-law was far more sure of herself. She slapped my cheeks hard, first this then the other. Her fists pummelled my breasts and my still swollen stomach till they had to pull her off my cowering, bleeding body. she shouted, in a rage mixed with fear, Do you need any more proof that this is not a woman? The barren witch has killed my

grandson, and she lies there asking us why!. Mayamma smiled toothless at me, as if the memory had lost someone of its bite;" (prelude).

One day, when Mayamma is hanging her new sari to dry, her mother-in-law mocks:

"What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch? And she pulled up my (Mayamma's) sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly ground spices in to my barrenness. My burned thighs my clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails."(113)

Her Mother-in-law abuses her every day. She forces Mayamma to fast every other day and to do penance to change the evil course of her horoscope. Mayamma welcomed her penance like an old friend and did everything she could do. She woke up at four in the morning, walked to the pond, prayed, and dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness. One day, the goddess she had prayed blessed her womb and joy rushes through her blood. After long prayers she is blessed with a son:

"Then the blood came soon and soon. No expense was spared, my husband wanted the new village doctor, not the midwife. He shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my blood, my dying son. She is strong, she will bear many more children, he said. But after Raja was born two years later, I still groaned with pain"(122)

This scene, beginning with joy in the blood and ending with tragic bleeding, is inscribed in Hariharan's style, combining strangely jaunty rhythms and concise diction. Mayamma's husband left the house taking away all the money and soon her mother-in-law also passes away cursing her. Though Mayamma never saw her husband again, she found his replica in their son. A wastrel from birth, he threatened and cursed and even beat his mother till he finally caught a fever and died. In spite of his cruel behaviour, Mayamma serves her son on the death bed. "The day he died, Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handiwork: now all these had been snatched from her"

Through Mayamma, the old family retainer of Devi's in-laws, Hariharan exposes the helplessness of traditionally suppressed rather illiterate woman. She becomes the target of social norms. Her disarming passivity makes her suffer patiently for quite a long period. After bearing the cruelty of her husband and mother-in-law, she tries to infuse meaning into the life of her son only to acknowledge the fact that her son is the xerox copy of her husband. The suppressed anger and sufferings of her heart comes in the form of tears on the day her son died. She wept from the core of her heart remembering her youth and her past.

Gita Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* has created characters of everyday life and with their meager problems touches upon the larger issues of gender exploitation embedded in pedagogic discourses. Devi is the central character and other equally strong women characters are explored in relation to her. These characters may appear abnormal in their behaviour in some cases but welcome life on their own terms. With the eyes of Devi and her emotions, one comes to realize the condition of women in changing scenario. Hariharan presents a picture of real society where such characters do occur. She selected the less prominent figures from the Indian epics and Puranas. She talks about Gandhari, Amba who are less known to the contemporary learners instead of talking about Sita and Savithri. She talks

about Indian myths which are forgotten by many of us in the era of globalization and liberalization. Our sophisticated lives made us renounce our heritage. On the whole, this novel is the retelling of the past. Thus she turns into the act of restoration—restoration of lost Indian tradition. Gita Hariharan not only indianized the incidents but also the use of language. She abundantly used the Indian words like agraharam, ashtapdi, nadaswaram, nagaligapushpa and so on. She takes the Indian culture to the English speaking countries through the chosen Indian vocabulary. She has indianized a genre—English fiction. Several Indian women writers have attempted to transform a woman's status from victimization to empowerment and project a new sense of woman's identity. Githa Hariharan too deals with the question of woman's identity and her innate strength, lies in her struggle for survival. Dissatisfied with age old norms that emphasize woman's passive role as a wife, Githa Hariharan attempts to establish a new order. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman's role and edifies the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self.

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