

# DIFFERENT SHADES OF WOMEN EXPERIENCES IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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## ABSTRACT

While presenting a parallel through women characters of mythical stories and legends to the present-day women characters, Githa Hariharan tries to establish that though suppression is not new to women but the means of oppression and the way women have been contending with it is changing and this becomes the theme of *The Thousand Faces of Night* as the writer chooses her main characters who share commonality in terms of their genetic identity i.e. of woman but whose experiences of being a woman are entirely different in shades. The paper investigates different types of women experiences as portrayed in Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The *Thousand Faces of Night* aims to present the inner lives of women and tries to scrutinize the confined social structure which does not accept women's role apart from the conventional role. It is the story of Devi's struggle, a young woman's journey towards self-attainment. The writer highlights her experiences by interspersing them with those of other women and hence the position of women entrapped in male-oriented power structures has been explored. Devi's story has been complimented by the stories of four other women – her grandmother, her mother, her mother-in-law and her housemaid. Along with the long history of women's subjugation has been shown a scrutiny of myths that have a considerable impact on Indian psyche as well as the consciousness of the protagonist. In the course of study of the novel, we find the novelist dealing with the experiences of women of different generations, different classes, different education and of different periods too. Although women have been under male subjugation since time immemorial, however, they have been aware of their subordinate position and from time to time they have developed the means of resistance and subversion through one or another way.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender is a vital part of all human experiences. It shapes the decisions, preferences and ways of life of individuals and hence is all-encompassing in human life. Thus it is useful to study gender experiences and identities of women who have been at the receiving end of a socially constructed hierarchy. While presenting a parallel through women characters of mythical stories

and legends to the present-day women characters, Githa Hariharan tries to establish that though suppression is not new to women but the means of oppression and the way women have been contending with it is changing and this becomes the theme of *The Thousand Faces of Night* as the writer chooses her main characters who share commonality in terms of their genetic identity i.e. of woman but whose experiences of being a woman are entirely different in shades. The paper investigates different types of women experiences as portrayed in Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

The novel, written in 1992, received the coveted Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first book in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). A collection of stories *The Art of Dying* was published in 1993, and a book of stories for children *The Winning Team* in 2004. She has also edited a book of stories in English translated from South Indian languages *A Southern Harvest* (1993) and co-edited a collection of stories for children *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997). *The Thousand Faces of Night* aims to present the inner lives of women and tries to scrutinize the confined social structure which does not accept women's role apart from the conventional role. It is the story of Devi's struggle, a young woman's journey towards self-attainment. The writer highlights her experiences by interspersing them with those of other women and hence the position of women entrapped in male-oriented power structures has been explored. Devi's story has been complimented by the stories of four other women – her grandmother, her mother, her mother-in-law and her housemaid.

Along with the long history of women's subjugation has been shown a scrutiny of myths that have a considerable impact on Indian psyche as well as the consciousness of the protagonist. The discussion of myths in the novel is so significant that S. Ramanathan considers the novel as the "commemoration of Indian mythology". He says that while contemporary women writers talk about the contemporary women's problems in love, sex and marriage with greater confidence, Githa Hariharan articulates these themes with the help of Indian mythology. While for C. Vijayasree, Hariharan uses the myths in process of networking women of different ages and generations (177), for Urnila Verma, the novel demonstrates how the religious sayings, anecdotes, words of wisdom uttered by old people, expressed through various rituals, religious rites and customs, emphasize the acceptance of woman's traditional role (101).

The novel begins with Devi's encounter with racist remarks in America. She is a young and confident woman living in America and is in relationship with a black American man Dan. She feels alienated in the company of friends and relatives of Dan as their conversation turns racist in her presence. Dan has proposed her for marriage but she refuses his offer due to her ambivalent attitude towards American culture. Out of filial love for her mother, she comes back to India though she knows that it involves greater risk than staying with Dan in America

(Hariharan, 6). When she returns to India, she realizes that it is difficult to change the old order with her revolutionary ideas. Moreover she has been fed upon the stories of mythical women told by her grandmother which also are at work in her subconscious mind. So she agrees to marry Mahesh, a regional manager in a multinational company and tries to fit herself in the role of a wife and daughter-in-law just as her mother did years ago. She expects Mahesh to support her on emotional level but often finds herself contemplating:

A marriage cannot be forced into suddenly being there, it must grow gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling. What about us? What kind of a life will we make together? It seems too foolish, too intense a question to ask of this reasonable stranger who has already carefully examined, experienced, dissected and is now ready to file away as settled, something as fragile and newborn as our marriage. Can his acute businessman's eyes, with all their shrewd power, really be weak-sighted? Does he not see that it is too early for quietness? Too soon for the companionship of habit? (49)

Devi's life lacks the color and excitement that she had expected. More than Mahesh's absence due to long business tours, it is his callousness that leaves Devi utterly disparaged. Devi feels deceived and slighted. Devoid of the much needed emotional sustenance, she finds marriage full of seclusion and suffocation:

This then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood (54).

Mahesh weighs her against other women who are not well educated but seem to be far better at their job and are cheerful too. He is insensitive to the fact that Devi possesses an individual identity that needs to express itself in a role away from that of a wife. When she expresses her wish to work as a research assistant, he discourages her by saying what she could do. She tries everything to get accustomed to the new life of a housewife. She spends her days cooking, asking questions about the house, Baba's lunch i.e. the questions expected of a daughter-in-law (50). Her world gets smaller day by day, the center-point of which is the ancestral house of Mahesh. She begins to know every shadow in the house. This lonesomeness and monotony of the life of a housewife leads her to the extent of psychosis:

In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears, and that accused desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood, blur the blood strokes, black and white, of 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. In the other scenarios I am the benevolent goddess, above mortal indignities and cravings. (95)

She starts dreaming ghosts and plans vehemently about how to keep insanity away. She thinks of writing letters, reading the books given by Baba, sweeping out the floors and having picnic with Mahesh to fill the gaps which are suffocating her. She spends her time wandering in the house, listening to the stories of Baba. In Mahesh's absence, she develops an emotional connection with Baba because Baba is the only person who talks to her and spends time with her. He is an old Sanskrit professor who keeps on telling Devi about music, legends and the characteristics of an ideal woman. Baba's stories assign a great deal of responsibility to her. While comparing the stories told by her grandmother to that of Baba's, she derives the conclusion:

Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. They make one point in concise terms: that the saints lived according to the laws of time-tested tradition. 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. (51)

She thinks of all the tales of mythical heroines told by her grandmother, making fine comparisons between the intense and tremendous lives of the mythological women and grimy stories of real women around her. Devi's grandmother narrates the mythological stories that are significantly placed in situations which call for mythical clarification so that Devi can derive the preferred meaning. These stories become so much a part of her life that Devi thinks she is the very embodiment of all the avenging deities. Devi feels resentful like Gandhari and insulted like Amba of her grandmother's stories. B. Krishnaiah explains, "These stories provide two paths to women either to obey their husbands like the former protagonists or revolt against them in the event of male domination like the latter examples" (49). Fed by her grandmother's stories of palaces, self-sacrificing heroines and women turning into men, Devi realizes that she can relate neither to the aggressive model nor to the benevolent model of femininity.

In spite of doing all possible efforts to turn into an ideal wife and an ideal daughter-in-law, the rude behavior on Mahesh's part makes her realize the trap she is in. When he tries to establish his absolute authority over her, she defies his authority subtly. She even derives satisfaction in not being able to carry children for Mahesh. When this loneliness throttles her, she takes herself to alcohol and attempts to find succor in Gopal's company, a musician in her neighborhood. The act of storming out of Mahesh's life provides essence to her life. Castigating her husband to an abandoned life without wife or child, Devi flees with Gopal. This decision of hers can be regarded as her refusal to live like Mayamma or Sita, who are the victims of marital violence in one form or the other. She does not want to end up as a self-sacrificing wife. Mayamma, however, knows that it is essentially her sense of isolation that has drawn her to Gopal.

To Gopal, music means what the longing for a successor had meant to Mahesh. Devi realizes that Gopal is just another attractive oppressor, who cannot see beyond either the fervor for a raga or the various masks of his divergent lives. She comes to know that she would not be happy with him. It is an act of protest against Mahesh and against her own self. Gopal is a flirt with aspirations for a patrician way of life. She realizes that the jubilation is fading fast, and understands that she occupies only a secondary status in his life and that their inner selves are not united. Initially, Devi's bond with Gopal is warm and tender, and to some extent he succeeds in giving Devi what Mahesh could not. But the moment he removes his mask, Devi discerns that Gopal is no better than Mahesh. She reflects, "I have made very few choices . . . But I was too well-prepared, and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda Road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from all my trials" (137). Life with Gopal begins to seem like a kite that had snapped free of its string (129). As months go by, "the images his music evoked in her were no longer so uplifting, or even neutral" (129). She finds Gopal's pupils misbehaving and attempting to flirt with her. She finds this deplorable and offensive. Devi does not find much difference between Mahesh and Gopal. Both of them love their jobs more and so her presence or absence would make no difference to either of them. She realizes that she is the one who allowed others to pull her strings and learns the fact that in this male dominated society, it is difficult to survive and find reliability for her emotions because for a man, a woman has always been primarily an object of sex and pleasure. Devi dismisses all the illusions of his music from her life. She becomes alert to the inner call of self-realization and moves once again. She returns to her mother in search of a more persistent relationship.

Second important character in the novel is Sita who is a self-confident middle aged woman. She was an accomplished musician in her youth. Her husband had selected her for marriage keeping in view her talent only. She is a headstrong lady who knows how to deal with the persons and troubles around her: "She plotted and planned with single-minded devotion, till

years later, her schemes bore ripe, fulfilling fruit” (102). Her personality is in acute opposition to that of her husband’s who is a profound book lover and a dreamer too whereas Sita is a realistic, matter-of- fact woman who wants to raise her daughter in a disciplined and pragmatic way rather than dreaming and fantasizing fairy tales. Her regimented lifestyle is apparent through the details of her home given by the writer. She had devoted her life to becoming an ideal wife and daughter-in- law and had spent most of the hours in the kitchen doing what a new bride is expected to do. Still she has to face her father-in- law’s reproachful comments: “Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in- law?” (30) At this point, she forsakes what defined her i.e. her veena and directs her life towards becoming a perfect housewife. Though she keeps herself away from music, the need of her soul and loses her identity as a consequence, yet she emerges out to be the controller of her life and the life of her family too. She does not turn into a victim waiting for what would happen next to her, rather she uses her sacrifice as a means of power and becomes the head of the family. Just like Gandhari’s blind folding herself was an act of protest, Sita’s decision to abandon veena is also an act of both retaliation and denunciation. It is, no doubt, loss of her sovereignty but ironically it also serves as a means to usurp power. She is no longer an oppressed wife and daughter-in law. Though she is aware that her marriage is devoid of passionate love, still she is prepared to do anything to protect her marriage. Very deftly and without creating any scene, she thwarts her cousin Annapurna’s advances towards her husband.

She also exhibits audacity and fortitude to take hold of her life after her husband dies.. She learns to keep her independence and individuality alive within the relationships. It is towards the end of the novel she is shown to be a woman with a will of her own resuming her love for veena. She acknowledges her identity and the needs of her “self”. Her return to music and the welcome Devi gets are strong indications of her release of her “self” from the clutches of the past.

Third important character Mayamma, the old care-taker- cum-cook at Mahesh’s house is the greatest victim of all women. All her life she has tried to gratify others. She was married at the age of twelve but knew no happiness in marriage. Being illiterate and unaware, she has suffered a lot at the hands of a dictatorial mother-in-law and a beast-like husband and son. She feels that success in life for a woman depends on her ability to suffer and carry on in this male-dominated society. Hence Mayamma accepts her destiny – as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman, a mother, and bears the cruelty inflicted upon her by the patriarchal system. She firmly believes that women are not meant to ask questions. She even advises Devi not to ask any question in her life as the answer she got to her questions had silenced her for lifetime. She was provided with no choice but to live an inexorable life. Mayamma represents the category of Indian women who accept their fate without complaint, by following the age-old structure of women subjugation. They are meek, submissive, bound to the traditions of family

and the institution of marriage. In spite of all this, she is able to be firm. She tells Devi the tales of real-life women and narrates the story of her own life too.

Parvatiamma, mother-in-law of Devi was a loving and gentle lady as is told by Mayamma to Devi. But she was relegated to the loneliness of the big house. The impulse to apply the notions conveyed in the hymns sung by her, gradually grew stronger within her. She was an ambitious woman; she had stripped herself of the life ordained to her as a self-sacrificing housewife and like a “man in self-absorbed search for God” left her house in search of salvation. (64)

Devi's grandmother Pati is another woman character who plays a great part in shaping the psyche of Devi. She serves as a medium which connects the mythical and real worlds of Devi. She is a worldly-wise woman. Through mythical stories, she teaches Devi the “womanly virtues” essential for a marriage to survive. Pati's stories are designed to be told on particular occasions. She has a story in answer to every question of Devi. To explain the subjugation of women and all other troubles endured by women, she tells the little girl stories upon stories. To vindicate the sacrifice made by Sita, Pati presents a parallel in the form of Draupadi's story. To explain the fate met by Gauri, she tells her the story of a girl marrying a snake who after marriage turns into a handsome man. But as soon as she grew older, the lessons of her stories take a different shape. She no longer tells the stories of mythological heroines who admitted defeat. Rather she starts telling her stories of women avengers like Amba which serves as a parallel to Uma's life. The shift in Pati's perception of noble and pious womanly attributes shows how she had got disillusioned from self-denying definition of womanhood after being witness to the fate of so many women around her.

In the course of study of the novel, we find the novelist dealing with the experiences of women of different generations, different classes, different education and of different periods too. Pati and Mayamma belong to the older generation who is uneducated and unaware of their rights. Pati tries to justify the oppression of women through drawing parallel to the life of mythological heroines and taking inspiration from them. Mayamma finds it impractical to question patriarchal system and remains silent all through her life. But towards the end of their lives, they realize that liberation does not lie in self-denial, rather it lies in acceptance of one's self and challenging the oppression. Mayamma becomes a passive agent in Devi's self-attainment by telling her the stories of brainy women like Parvatiamma and Lakshmiamma. While one found her identity in breaking the domestic sickly sweet affiliations and following the path of spiritualism, the other gets her wishes fulfilled by feigning madness which has been foreshadowed by Pati's statement earlier in the story: “a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning” (20). Sita too shows the power of asserting her individuality and breaking the myth of male superiority, in a subtle way. Devi, after getting disappointed at the hands of her husband as

well as her lover, finds that true happiness lies in one's "self" only. Though Pati has culturally conditioned her to suffer disappointment, loss of self-esteem and ill-treatment, she gradually becomes aware of their suppressive nature and discards them. Although women have been under male subjugation since time immemorial, however, they have been aware of their subordinate position and from time to time they have developed the means of resistance and subversion through one or another way.

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