

From Victim to Victor: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

The situation of women is that she—a free and autonomous being like all creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.

Simon de Beauvoir

Women in Indian Social setup have received different treatment at different times. In the pre-independence era, women were predominantly mild, docile and submissive with no choices to lead her life. There were legal economic and social restrictions on her basic rights. She was compelled to accept norms set up by the traditional male dominated society. The post independence era has given a new meaning to the role assigned to a woman. Even at lower levels of privilege, some sense of personal rights has percolated into their consciousness so that the stereotype of the Indian woman as a submissive, mindless object of pity finds no concrete example. Education and the changing social conditions have paved way for the emergence of a 'New Woman'. According to Usha Bande and Atma Ram:

“The ‘New Woman’ is one who, shown of her ‘feminine mystique’ is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with heightened sense of dignity and individuality. The ‘New Woman’ then is the product of a new economic order in which women cast astride her ‘invisibility’ comes out of the metaphorical purdah and avails of the opportunities provided by education, enfranchisement and employment. She, with her male counterpart, struggles for achievements in the professional and economic spheres, and deconstructs the image of a submissive, repressed and self-effacing being. The picture that emerges is that of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive.”

The Thousand Faces of Night is Githa Hariharan's first novel, published in 1992. It was awarded the commonwealth prize for the best first novel. It lays bare the various conflicts in a woman's life. On one hand, she explores the continuing impact of age-old myths and lore that are deeply imbedded in the Indian woman's psyche. The enormous weight of tradition continues to bear down on the woman's character, leading them to become gentle, adjustable,

accommodative, pitiable and service minded. On the other, she depicts women in the context of the contemporary world as an individual with freedom of choices. Githa Hariharan has successfully captured the Indian Ethos. The themes dealt by her are varied depicting clash between modernity and tradition, east—west conflict, identity crisis of the protagonist and the Indian woman's search for independence. In 1990, feminism has become more complex. In Indian writing by women, the narratives are not preoccupied with the theme of the struggle for equal rights but rather with the conflicts and tensions of implementing these rights in society, which still operates according to traditional patterns. Githa Hariharan brings out that women are subjected to multitude of forces often contradictory. The women in India as women all over the world have begun to move towards self-perception, self-expression and self-determination, slowly indeed and not entirely against tradition within family bindings. The conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women in Githa Hariharan's novel.

The present novel covers the life story of three women, spanning almost three generations due to age. Nevertheless, the novelist mixes this thread very dexterously in a compact fabric. The three women are Mayamma, Sita and Devi. Devi is the central character of the novel is born in a traditional Brahmin family. When the novel opens, Devi is in the USA because of her mother's support. She spends two years in the USA as a student. Her sojourn brings her face to face with the conflict between tradition and modernity. In America she is no longer a weakling in her dream she is "a victor, an uncompromising survivor" (p9). Though she dreams of living her life in a liberal setup like America, circumstances bring her back to her widowed mother in India. She refuses an offer of marriage from her black American friend Dan and returns to India. "The brief dream was over. She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet halfway, naked and venerable, her homecoming. (11)

Hariharan hints that Devi's character developed as it did because of many mythological stories told to her in her childhood by her grandmother. She dreams of a 'Swayamvar' for herself. Devi's mother arranges her meeting with suitable boys. She gets married to Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company. She tries to fit herself in the role of a wife and daughter-in-law just as her mother Sita did years ago. She soon realizes the true colours of Mahesh, after her marriage. The vast, empty, ancestral house, surrounded by a large, wild garden becomes the focal point of her existence. Mahesh is always on tours, remains a shadow stranger who views marriage just as a necessity. As a result, she fails to find emotional support and warmth of life from Mahesh. She realizes the emptiness of her life.

“I must look for a job, I have so little to do, I said. My hands spread before me on the table, palms upwards empty.

‘What can you do? Mahesh asked, like a ruthless interviewer stripping away the inessential. When he says the words they become true. What could I do?’ (64)

Simon de Beauvoir traces female development through the formative stages –childhood, youth and sexual initiation. Her goal is to prove that women are not born female but shaped by thousand external processes. She shows how, at each stage of her upbringing, a girl is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of subjectivity and flatter her into an object. Denied the possibility of independent work or creative fulfilment the woman must accept the dissatisfying life of housework, childbearing and sexual slavishness. Women are relegated to secondary roles, and denied individuality and responsibility. These assumptions dominate social political and cultural life to such an extent that the women come to believe in them, accept them and enact them in real life. Thus, women become what they do because society expects them to be so.

The conflict arises when Devi feels that her education has not prepared her for this kind of existence. “My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood.” (54). She is defenceless against Mahesh’s supreme confidence. He tells her that there is much to do at home, as Mayaama is getting old and needs help. He also feels that once she becomes a mother she will have much to do. Her freedom being thwarted, the gaping emptiness threatens her very existence. Devi seeks refuge in the stories of her gentle father-in-law. “The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does. (71) Baba’s stories define for Devi the limits of wifedom. Mythological stories told by her grandmother haunt her:

“like Sati you must burn yourself to death, like Sati you must vindicate your husband’s honour and manhood.

Like Parvati you must stand neck- deep in cold, turbulent waters, the hungry, predatory fish devouring your feet.

Like Hemavati you must reap the bountiful harvest that will be yours if you embrace the lingam on the sacrificial alter.” She gathers the fragments from her

life no matter how insignificant and empty, embarks on her real journey, and says,
“I can learn to be a woman at last.” (95)

A ruthless probing into the lives of these women provokes Devi to have a life of her own. She recollects all the heroines of the stories told by her grandmother. These women meet their fate with bitter acceptance. She is also reminded of Amba who transforms her fate, her hatred of Bheeshama, who has wronged her and denied feminine fulfilment into sweet revenge and glorious triumph. Devi rejoices in imagining herself as Durga or Kali ready to avenge the assault of her inner core. She makes a choice and elopes with Gopal, after condemning Mahesh to a lonely life without wife or child. After her initial experiment with love, she leaves Gopal too. She realizes that Gopal a musician is not able to see beyond the passion of raga or the various masks of her discrete lives. She moves ahead in search of her identity.

Her mother Sita makes her share of painful sacrifices to become devoted as a wife and mother. Sita has to give up her first love, the Veena after being questioned by her father-in-law, “Put that Veena away are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” Sita cuts herself from the past and becomes a perfect housekeeper, a blameless wife. Like Gandhari who wrapped her anger in a blindfold connects with Sita who breaks the strings of her Veena with a vow never to touch it again. A symbolic correlative is seen in the way she trains the Jasmine creeper to grow horizontally, filling its specified spaces on the supports provided, without allowing it to grow upwards as its nature. The Indian woman is particularly conditioned by traditions and conventions and willingly accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of the family honour and prestige. Indian woman usually does not bother about her own personal happiness and comfort as much as she addresses herself to the task of making others happy and upholding tradition and conventions. Devi’s unexpected elopement shatters Sita emotionally. She then decides to live for herself and realizes how wrong she had been to give up her love for the Veena for society approved unfulfilling role of a model housewife. She cleans and dusts her long deserted Veena to symbolize the possible decision to lead her life as per her own wish and to realize the unfulfilled desire. Thus, the feminist movement aims at overthrowing the age-old practices that lead to the oppression and victimisation of women.

As Shirin Kudchedkar says, “it disputes the conflation of sex and gender categories and releases women from confinement to gender roles. It aims at making women the subject of her own story and not the object of male frustration. Women come to realize the in authenticity of the lives lead and struggle to

discover for themselves their own impulses, reactions, desires and needs. Their quest is for self-knowledge and self-realization, which can in turn lead to relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. Individual change, and social change both are desired goals, together with an eventual change in perceptions and attitudes.” (Kudchedkar 34)

Mayamma the maid who is given shelter by Devi’s mother-in-law Parvatamma. She is married at twelve and tortured by her husband and her mother-in-law. Her husband leaves her never to come back again. She has a son who turns out to be a brute. When Mayamma is asked why she had put up with that miserable life, she recalls her past when she had lost her first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear. She is told by the quack doctor, that a woman must learn to bear pain. She is tortured and abused by her mother-in-law, husband and later her son. Thus, Mayamma struggles desperately to get recognition as a human being and expects to be treated with dignity all her life.

Marriage turns out to be disastrous for these women. The men in their lives do not prove to be supportive and faithful. Their marriages are demeaning marriages that crush dignity, individual aspiration and emotional imaginative refinement. Devi is the modern woman who does not find any sense in being acquiescent. It does not appeal to her imagination to be suffering and sacrificing individual. As she feels the need for an identity and individual fulfilment, she begins to question the conventions and defies the traditions, which undermine her importance and individuality. The craving for individual freedom and happiness results in breaking up of family and relations.

Close analysis of women from three generations suggest individual ways or strategies these women adopt to assert themselves. After reflecting on the lives of the three women, Devi feels that Sita, Mayamma and she have done enough tight rope walking. “Three of the women who walked a tight rope and struggled for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves.” (135) It was time for them to live with dignity. In a symbolic gesture, Devi throws her peacock- coloured sari to blot the myriad reflections of herself. She is no longer a mere reflection no more on the run. She is a survivor a victor, who has a life of her own. As Rajul Bargava rightly says “Thus, like most post modernist writers, Hariharan’s texts are ironical, ambiguous, open-ended and have multiple perspectives. They seem to focus on some underlying truth that is not always described or even referred to in the story...but there is always an internal design, some oblique reference which combines into a rich texture

of trope—exposing a pattern of feminist meaning within the symbolic traditional structure. (Bhargava 84)

Devi goes back home to join her mother. She finds the garden “wild and over-grown” not pruned anymore but “lush in spite of its sand-choked roots,” and hears the faint sounds of Veena, hesitant and child-like”(139)welcoming her into the house. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a symbolic work of the pathetic story of victimization of women in the patriarchal society. Githa Hariharan sends new signals for the women of the modern age to break away from the shackles of imposed notion and have the freedom to make choices of life, career and partner. Her women want to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves, where there is no need of hypocrisy. Through her novel she is able to support a sound knowledge of what it means to be a woman in the Indian context.

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