

GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT: A REWORKING OF MYTH AND FOLKLORE ON CONTEMPORARY LINES

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ABSTRACT: The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* may be read as revisionist myth-making program in which the novelist attempts to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths and folklores. It is through these myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crisis of identity. The novel also peeps how the female point of view differs from the male discourse, especially in context of the mythical tales from Mahabharata and the folk stories. In this paper, I have attempted to appraise critically how the women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* tear apart the network of myths and folklores to eke out a space for them. So, the novel is not only about the narration of variegated patriarchal myths and folklores but also about survivals from those myths through resilience on contemporary lines.

Key Words: Myths, Folklores, Stature of women, Patriarchy, Identity crisis.

India has a rich legacy of mythical stories and legends which form an integral part of Indian literature. The use of myths in a realistic fiction causes displacement to maintain realism in the text. The myths of Indian womanhood, so far been written by men, have been used as an instrument to support the patriarchal ideals. The behavior patterns of an Indian woman are predetermined by the myths of Sita and Savitri.

Women are seen as custodians of cultural particularism and so are controlled in different ways to preserve national, cultural and ethnic identities. But the slow and steady changes in social, cultural and economic patterns of life have altered the nature of reality for women and have generated in them a sense of freedom and resistance against patriarchy. An upsurge in feminist writings gave rise to a conflict between tradition and modernity.

Githa Hariharan is one of the most prolific women writers of India. Githa has become a literary luminary with her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* which has added a feather in her cap -the Commonwealth prize for best first book. A feminist at the core, Hariharan is particularly concerned with women's issues, and enjoys a crucial place in the history of Indian English fiction. In her books such as *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Hariharan engages herself with the task of reinterpreting the traditional myths. Hariharan's protagonists such as Devi and Vasu master protest against the normative and the dominant and try to excavate the submerged or eroded stories. Githa Hariharan's debut novel is a feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewritten and retold from a gynocentric perspective.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a scathing criticism of the way the women are compelled to perform the subordinated roles as decreed by the patriarchy. Through the help of various myths and folklores, all of which descended from patriarchal tradition, the male world tries to subjugate the women and instill into them a false consciousness. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, sees through the falsity of mythical stories and the so-called grand-narratives of patriarchy. The various accounts of trials and survivals given by the women characters in the novel ranging from the earlier narration by the grandmother to the misery of Mayamma open up a discursive space for women to initiate a feminine discourse. So, this novel is a microcosm of Indian women experiences which assembles a diversified group of women in the intricate plot.

Devi, the protagonist belongs to the third generation who returns to India after spending a few years in America. From the beginning of the novel, we see how Devi is denied the choice of her own and is subjected behind the memories of Dan, a Black African with whom she forged bonds of friendship while studying in America as it does fit in with her tradition, for a better life in India which her mother promises she sure would find.

She returns from America to India to find herself hedged in with the traditional roles assigned for the women making her a prey to the chafing pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order, a demanding mother's love. The institution of family is that nucleus in which Indian women are taught to find their fulfillment. In spite of her higher education in the US, Devi must be married to an eligible groom and embrace the role of a house-maker. Devi was taught in her childhood of how to be a good woman, a good house-keeper, and find her completeness in motherhood. Her mother arranges a swayamvara for her that shows how marriage is posited as the reason for being in a traditional Indian family.

The middle-class South Indian life portrayed in *The Thousand Faces of Night* brings together a number of women whose diverse experiences reveal the various ways in which they are subjected to the oppression of the male-dominated Indian culture. The plot of the novel revolves around the lives of women in South Indian towns which refer to the sexual discrimination and its unabashed power-politics of denigrating the stature of women. In this novel, Hariharan has represented three generations of women who are separated by the gulf of time but are linked by the shared reductiveness of their gender. Devi, her mother Sita, her grandmother and Mayamma, subjected to torture, voice their protest in their own subtle ways.

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The fictional nature of the idea of 'Eternal Feminine' is decoded by Devi's uneducated grandmother who used to tell her stories about "virtuous" women in Indian myths redefining the man-made myths. Devi's recollections of her grandmother's stories infuse her with an indomitable spirit that prepares her to launch a battle later. Devi becomes familiar with the legends of mythical heroines narrated to her by her grandmother.

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The grandmother's interpretation of the ancient myths is refreshingly modern, asserting the individuality of women as human beings and endorsing their resistance to oppression. Grandmother's narration is a kind of revisionist myth-making in its own right. The grandmother doesn't dwell on the prominent figures of the Hindu myths—Sita, Savitri, Damyanti or Anasuya often celebrated as paragons of female virtue. She rather retrieves marginal figures from Mahabharata like Gandhari, Amba and Hariharan deconstructs the myth about the stability in marriage through the marital relationship of Devi and Mahesh, a chauvinist.

The arranged marriage proves to be a complete failure. Devi wants an equal share in her matrimonial relationship but Mahesh never recognises her individuality and doesn't give her independent space. His authoritarian behaviour haunts Devi and she finds herself in an anchorless universe when Mahesh refuses to grant her freedom of choice. He refuses to consider her problems seriously and ignores her aspirations. In keeping with dominant patriarchal set up, the only thing he expects of Devi is to produce children.

Devi seeks solace in the company of her father-in-law, Baba. In her spare time, she listens to the stories that her father-in-law tells her about "virtuous" women of past days who are still worshiped today for their noble devotion to their family. Devi learns the household works from the old maid-servant Mayamma in Mahesh's house who, at first, was not willing to hand over her domination over the kitchen to Devi. Devi listens to the story of Mayamma, who was married at twelve, is trapped by the construction of motherhood. She was tortured by her animal like husband and cruel mother-in-law and was forced to undergo ten years of penance for her inability to conceive a son.

She woke up at four in the morning and walked among the blue tipped shadows to the pond. She prayed, made vows, and dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness. She starved every other day; she gave up salt and tamarind.

Finally a son was born to her but her miseries did not come to a halt as the son became a wastrel and a complete nightmare for Mayamma. He warned to beat his mother and sold her last pair of gold bangles before he died. On the day of his death, Mayamma, as a mark of protest, burnt her horoscope along with the body of her son. She gradually learnt the strategies of survival as she herself put it, I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry.

Devi learns about her from the maid-servant Mayamma. Parvati, as Mayamma tells Devi, relinquished her motherhood and embraced spirituality as means of way out. According to the traditional myth, Parvati is the helpmate of Shiva and she helped Shiva attain the status of yogi by taking charge of the household activities. She finds momentary joy through a brief relationship with Gopal who comes raking embers buried in the ash of her hopes and dreams. She accompanies Gopal on all his concert tours but as months pass, she no longer enjoys Gopal's company. However, she is unable to get permanent happiness through this relationship as she thinks him as a dancing peacock, solely concentrated on himself. Her admiration for him wanes since she discovers that he is a flirt.

Devi's life comes full circle with her choosing to come back to her mother to begin her life afresh. Discarding all ties, she is able to find a liberating space for herself. This homecoming might be regarded as, in Kristeva's terms, the celebration of the semiotic over the symbolic.

The end of the novel marks the beginning of a meaningful joint pursuit with separate independent goals and values. Mayamma no longer faces the threat of a drunken husband or a tyrannical mother-in-law. The mothers of Devi's rebirth are, thus, manifold. Besides her mentors, there are many other women whose lives offer new and useful lessons to Devi. She draws on her biological matrilineage as well as spiritual and mythical heritage.

To conclude, Githa Hariharan's protagonist, thus, shows the possibility of liberation from the restrictive myth of womanhood in an authentic Indian background. The counter-hegemonic act, though difficult, is not unattainable. Jon Mee aptly remarks: Thus, the weight of mythical prototypes on Indian women's minds and the modes of defiance presented through three different generations of women in this novel, heralds the era of women's awakening through reworking of old myths and folklores on contemporary lines.

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