

# Feminism reflected in Githa Hariharan's Thousand Faces of Night

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## Abstract:

Feminism is the ideology of women's liberation it is the belief that women suffer injustice because of sex(gender).Law journals which use the word "Feminism" have not as yet attempted to define the very concept of which they import to speak. We wrote to the editors of the Yale Journal of Law & Feminism (YJLF) seeking a statement of their definition, if any, assuming they must have one. We never got a reply. Still, it's curious that a law journal on "Feminism" probably does not have a current definition.

Githa Hariharan, a well-known Indian woman novelist, has tried to focus on the deeply ingrained biases of Indian society against the feminine gender. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) deals with the issues of feminism as well as the issues of gender and identity also. In it, she tries to explore mainly the lives of the characters namely, Devi, Sita and Mayamma who survives in a male dominated society. Woman faces all the problems in her life and even survives with her inner strength. Through the study of women characters, Githa provides us with a peek into the Indian tradition and culture and the position of women in the Indian society.

Primarily stage feminism is a voice against the institution of family that determines a woman's identity in a bourgeois society. Family is a social unit created by blood, marriage or adoption. It can be described as nuclear with parents and children or extended as encompassing other relatives. Women are important in this unit. Society or country or family can not progress without her active participation. She has been the master figure of the family, yet she leads a life of slavery, suffering and oppression. Her foremost role in it is to raise her children & take care of the house which is her fate. In her childhood she is under the will of her father, in youth of her husband and her husband dies of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will. In her childhood she is brought up in a loving & affectionate manner without any responsibility. But after her marriage, her situation changes automatically. Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man. In general, the position of a woman has been paradoxical. She has been the key person of the family, but she is still a 'second person' also. She is not give opportunity to think freely. She is conditioned by traditions & willingly accepts her responsibility. Man cannot accept freedom to woman.

According to Githa, otherness is a basic human feel. Any person refused freedom is under we call it oppression. Women are the other because define men them as inferior. In a paradoxical society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents. There is a view that she is to be given a new master, her husband who will her life. The traditional feminine virtues & graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the market of marriage. She is educated to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother & mother. In a traditional society, when a young girl reaches puberty, her movements are controlled. But at the same time, there are no restrictions for her brothers at that age. The double standards start operating overtly from this stage. They bind the girl's activities and encourage boys to develop outdoor activities.

Githa Hariharan is well aware of these facts and the present novel 'The Thousand Faces of Night' presents her close study of gender based discriminations shown in the family and their impact on women. Githa Hariharan was born in 1954, at coimbatore. She is an Indian author and editor based in New Delhi. Her first novel is *The Thousand Faces of Night*. It won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. Remarkable by its lyrical prose style, the novel charts the precarious course of three women's journey through Indian social norms. She obtained a BA in English from University of Mumbai and a MA in Communications from Fairfield University. She was educated at the Universities of Bombay and then at Fairfield, Connecticut.

Sita, the mother of Devi, is the character in the novel who attract readers attention. She has invested herself by effacing 'herself' in denying her womanness but at the same time she tries to become an ideal wife and ideal daughter- in-law. The concept of woman as subservient to men and as man's property is deep-rooted in the Indian tradition as well. Sita loved, veena playing, and it was her life. But as a woman is besieged with all sorts of decisions, she gets married. She gave up her love and spent her time in the kitchen, or her little office(102).

Sita's decision to discard veena is as much a self-denial for the sake of the family. She took full advantage of it and moulded herself into an efficient household machine working for her husband's advancement and he became a successful business executive. Annapurna, her cousin, tries to occupy her place. But she hovered around watching. At first, the sign of temptation, the initiation of an accomplice, she deftly swept into her palm the fragile budding sweetness. She crushed it, ruthlessly, and she secured her place. Her love for garden, veena-playing and Devi are her main objects in life, objects in her life that can produce results that she wanted. She hated Mahadevan's passion of folklore. When he dies, she burnt the is papers before they burnt the body, quickly efficiently in a modern satirized crematorium(106).

Each decision that she took is a strong decision. Generally, we see that mothers impose the same restrictions upon their daughters that were imposed upon them by their mothers i.e. the previous generation. They tried to accomplish their desires through their daughters. Sita wanted Devi to become an ideal woman and sent her to America for higher education. When Devi was born 'she found a new veena to play on, and at this time she was not going to give it up easily(104).

In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up with a view that she is to be given to a new master. Simone de Beauvoir observes that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. Sita belonged to traditional thinking. She recalled Devi from America and she had again been packed and dispatched, and this time to a permanent destination that is wifehood.(107) Marriage is the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. Marriage is supposed to be holy union of the two souls and bodies. In Hindu religion, the wife is known as Ardhagini or Sahadharmini which means equality. For her,

it is a trap which neglects her rights, her individuality, her independence of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself.

Marriage is a woman's adventure. With it, there is an end of her search because she merges herself in the family losing her identity. For her, family becomes more important than individual. She sacrifices herself. She is taught not to copy male qualities that will make her polluted and demonic. In patriarchal society, man cannot accept women's the freedom. So woman has the other.

The present novel depicts the tragedy of women, who in their inner mind express their from the bondage of male domination. Devi, highly educated, belonged to the third generation, second generation through her mother and also with first through the stories of her grandmother. The female migrant shows that she is invested with an adaptability that enables her both to preserve specific features of her own background, and to assimilate those of the country. Devi is that type of character. Devi is that type of emancipated, westernized woman who returns to her country, India and is supposed to fill in a slot traditionally reserved for her.

Her life in America and relations with Dan is a dream 'her inhibitions, her burden of as an Indian cannot agree to marry Dan. To her, her enjoyment was necessarily dependent on her inability to conceive of a life with him(6). After experiencing the bewildering freedoms and frustrations of student life in America, she came to India to live with her mother, Sita. Revisioning myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and man-made laws are subverted.

In the present novel, Devi is the listener of myths narrated by her grandmother in her childhood. These stories are not ordinary ones. 'She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions' (27) But the stories heard from her proves to be wrong when Devi faced that type of situation. The story of Nala-Damayanti's swayamvara proves wrong when she forced her own swayamvara. When she came to India, many difficulties came forward with day-to-day activities, but very soon she realizes that she was belonged to the family of traditional thinking.

Her grandmother stories belonged to the first generation of traditional thinking. So her stories were typical and prepared the child's mind for the rules and regulations and traditions and 'like sugar shapes she made for me, a rich, over- sweet syrup that was magically transformed over the fire into ornamented little elephants, swans with each feather delicately etched, her stories fashioned moulds.' (21) In spite of her high education in America, she agrees to marry like an Indian girl. Mahesh 'wasn't a prince' for her but a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpastes. But soon she knew that she was trapped. She tried to fit herself in the role of a wife, a good daughter-in-law. She points out that marriage is not a union of man and woman but the subjugation of the female in the interest of perpetuation of slavery and as private property. Mahesh disapproved of Devi's wishes like playing cards, to learn Sanskrit or to take up a job. His total contempt for Devi's individuality shows that he belonged to the patriarchal thinking.

Devi thinks that the stories of her grandmother were 'a prelude of womanhood' but Baba's stories 'define the limits'. Her father-in-law represents the benevolent and patriarchal aspects in his stories. He belonged to the patriarchal society.

The novel expresses the effects of patriarchy on women of different social classes, age and particularly her treatment as the other. After five or six proposals, she decided to marry Mahesh. But as a manager, he believed to manage everything in life. For him, marriage is just a necessary thing in life. He admits that he wanted 'a woman at him who will be a wife and a mother.' (23)

In Indian society, life of women after marriage is totally changed. She has not her own views. Women are also shackled by numerous social and religious customs and conventions that render them incarcerated behind curtains. Balzac says before marriage, woman is made by her parents and after marriage, a wife is what her husband makes her. When Devi expressed her wish to learn Sanskrit, Mahesh said, "And what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge?" (52) As she gets exasperated with her pompous husband, Mahesh, she learned the vitality of any Indian wife is to pretend to be a good wife, pretend to love entertaining that you are never sick or angry. she learns her vital duty from her old family retainer, Mayamma. The Indian society demands at least a pretension from their women that they are obeying the centuries old routines. In Indian society, after marriage, life of a girl is totally changed but not her husband.

Childlessness can make a woman powerless. Like that, Devi remains 'all bones and flat stomach' (86) when Mahesh asked her about pregnancy. In a patriarchal Indian society, man is positive and always right whereas woman is wrong and negative. Mahesh wanted the news of her pregnancy, but Devi did not seem to crave for motherhood. Her repeated response was 'no news'. She remains 'all bones and flat stomach.' (86). The fact is that he is fine and she is the one who needs to consult a gynecologist. Childlessness can leave a woman utterly powerless. But it can also be used as to tilt the scales of power. It helps Devi to restore her self-realization. She faced emptiness and meaningless existence in her marital life. He compared her with the other women who were not well educated.

Manu-shastra commands woman only to serve her husband. Sometimes, Devi thought herself like Sati, Durga and Kali. She was inspired by Baba's orphaned story 'Kritya' a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its Kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a Kritya. (70) This story was not told her by Baba because he belonged to patriarchal society. It appeals Devi the most. Devi opts out of motherhood and even out of marriage.

Some women live with men outside marriage because they seek wholeness and complete involvement in relationship. Devi also tried to lead the life of emancipation. But soon Devi realizes that his emotions towards her are not real. Man either sees her as a source of transcendence or projects his own guilt on her. In the patriarchal system, the only identity that a woman possesses is that which defines her in relation to a male she is either his wife or his child's mother. Devi's mother, grandmother, Mayamma and to some extent Devi also were entitled to dominate their respective families. However, they were lacking self-knowledge and their ideas modulated by the traditional patriarchal pattern. Devi didn't wish to lose her 'self' which has already been damaged in marriage, hence, they defied the institution and break away from their destroyer to seek self-fulfillment. She heard the inner-call of self-realization and went to her mother's house.

The novel throws light on this concept through the character of Devi and Mayamma, an old servant in Mahesh's house. The character, Mayamma, epitomizes many a poor who are exploited by husband, children in laws and cheated by everybody around and thrown away to rot by herself. For Mayamma marriage turned out to be an institution of oppression in various forms rather than of her protection for which it was primarily instituted, but she welcomed her penance like an old friend. In reality society rules and regulations do not permit most women to express their identity. A woman must never be free. A mother of a son was her identity. So she took up penance for 10 years.

Devi liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play, to attain a state of free creative individuality. Now, it is the self, the androgynous principle which is neither male nor female i.e. in quest of selfhood. In the novel, marriage turns into a trap, an institution of oppression and torment for women. All

men ruled over their wife with a very stern and rude set of rules while themselves enjoying all the freedom. They use and abuse women as objects and their personal possessions and try to crush their 'self' in order to enslave them. Devi, Sita and Mayamma are the characters who were used as an object.

In the novel, Devi, Sita or Mayamma treated their family as their own. A woman has a great place in family, in the life of man. If man is a flower, the fragrance is woman. If man is a ship, the radar is woman. She can be sweet as well as bitter, as well as kind also. However, these thinking and sensitive women have to face a lot of opposition from the narrow- minded and orthodox Indian society which considers tolerance, patience and forbearance as essential virtues of women. Indian women whose badge has been silent-suffering who is an upholder of Indian culture, is an oft-repeated type in Indian novel.

Hariharan's woman in novel is shown to overthrow the heavy rock of heritage with its 'thousand faces of night.' At the end, when Devi returns to her mother's house, she walks into her mother's garden which has grown wild and lush, no longer pruned under Sita's surveillance, sound of veena that had been silenced by Sita to 'walk the straight path to a single goal, wifehood meets her ears. The novel ends with an affirmation of mother-daughter relationship. Reflecting over their three lives, Devi feels that Mayamma, Sita and she herself have done enough tight-rope walking. Indian woman is particularly conditioned by traditions and conventions and willingly accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of the family honor and prestige. In male-dominated society, the inflated male tends to dominate and neglect the female who is his partner in life.

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