

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

Research Scholar

T. KAVITHA

Ph.D. Research scholar,
A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College
(Autonomous), Poondi

Research Advisor

Dr. N. LATHA

Assistant Professor of English
A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College
(Autonomous), Poondi

Abstract:

Githa Hariharan is a contemporary Indian Writer, Novelist, short story writer and feminist. Her first Novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Common Wealth Writer's prize for best first book in 1993. *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) highlights the Survival strategies of women belonging to three different generations. The protagonist of the Novel, Devi, being the youngest of the three is the US return modern woman who ends up in a better marriage. Another impressive character in the novel is her mother Sita, who strives for herself assertion by ambitious to bridge the widening gap between tradition and modernity. Mayamma, being the last is old caretaker in Devi's husband's house, and is a real typical instance for women's exploitation by patriarchal society. She belongs to distant past with her attachment location in the suffocating tradition and whose feeble life displays that for an Indian woman, married life becomes a success only if she tolerate all the agony heaped on her without retort.

Key words: Self – Assertion, Tradition, Modernity, exploitation, Marriage, Patriarchy.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a portrayal of different faces of women's suffering and depicts the status of women in Indian Society. The lives of the three women in The Thousand Faces of Night – Devi, Sita and Mayamma exposes the different dimensions of women, who belonged to different generations. Devi is the central character of the novel, is born in traditional Brahmin family, being the youngest of the three. She has returned from the US, offered her, Devi returned to India because 'ammas' letters brought with them an unspoken message of loneliness, poignant in its quiet dignity... But the image of her alone by the sea teased me like a magnet... (16). It is trapped in a bitter marriage. In her frantic attempts to be an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. Devi gradually loses her individuality. She lives like a stranger in her own house. Devi's marital life lacks the colour and excitement that she had expected. Mahesh is a matter of

fact, unromantic “regional Manager of a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste,” (22) tours frequently and expects nothing special or exciting from a marriage.

Gradually Devi discovers the fact that Mahesh does not care to love her and at the same he does not recognize her in efforts to love him. In fact, he scorns at her education whenever an argument arises between them. Mahesh questioned “This is what comes of educating a woman”. Your grandmother was barely illiterate wasn’t she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want (TTFN 74). Devi feels that her education, which is a residue of colonialism, has not prepared her to face Mahesh’s supreme confidence and superciliousness.

Mahesh never takes any imitative to spend adequate time with Devi. Thus it clearly indicates that Mahesh, a male chauvinist could never think his wife to be on par with him. His understanding of marriage is just a means to procreate. Such motive and mindset of Mahesh, promoted Devi to take revenge on him. Her strong urge for revenge is manifested in different forms. She identifies herself with Durga, a Hindu Goddess, who is believed to be the destroyer of evil. She says, “I lived a life of my own. I become a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi, I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demon’s heads” (TTFN 41).

She soon becomes frustrated and develops emotional pain and privation due to her conflict with the patriarchal ideas instilled within her due to patriarchal conditioning. She tries her level best to compromise with Mahesh to continue their marriage. But all her efforts go in vain because Mahesh is insistent that they must have baby and Devi discovers that she cannot conceive. He ultimately neglects all her emotional needs. She attracted towards Gopal, an Indian singer and ultimately elopes with him. She hopes to “Soar high on the crest of Gopal’s wave of ragas” (95). His sense of love and care has diverted her attention towards him. She went away with Gopal hoping to find her own emotion’s voice through music. She realized that she was alone in her isolated corner, an outsider forever in the fringes of a less ambivalent identity” (135). She realizes Gopal too cannot see beyond his passion for music. The fascination of the new relationship comes to an end with this realization. The two choices that Devi has made resulted in creating an unfathomable void in her life.

By leaving Mahesh, she emerges as an emancipated woman. After that she feels like a fugitive escaping from captivity until self-actualization dawns on her, she finally unites with her mother's "wild and overgrowth" garden. The novel reflects the continuing and inherent tension between the reinforcement of traditions and the resistance to recurrent cultural patterns. Ms. Hariharan seems to attribute Mahesh's arrogance to the embedded conceptions about a woman's role in Indian male psyche and women's powerlessness against the dominant mental attitude of India.

Another powerful character in the novel is Devi's mother Sita, who strives for assertion by aspiring to bridge the widening gap between tradition and modernity. Mayamma is the archetypal female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as she was expected to. She bore the brunt of cruelty that society had ordained for a woman – as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and a mother. She belongs to the distant past with her affixed location in the suffocating tradition. Married life becomes a success only if she endures all the torture heaped on her without retort.

Githa Hariharan, through this novel, which is in fact a collage-like work, records her deep sense of anguish against the Indian patriarchal ideologies that subjugate women to the core. Her attempts to unleash the different degrees of adjustments, opposition, resistance and struggle, of her women characters, and thereby she points out the lack of flexibility in patterns of social organization and the high levels of frustration and suffering experienced by women. She has succeeded in putting forth through her work that certain definite reforms can be initiated to uplift the aspirations of women.

Githa Hariharan is known for her bold and frank style of writing because her way of writings deals with issues concerning modern society. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman's role in cultural labyrinth and edifies the emergence of a new woman, who is true to her own self. All the three women in the novel attempt their best to brave the strong oppositions and create a space for their own lives. They achieve different levels of satisfaction depending upon their inherent nature. Hariharan's Devi created a new breed of woman protagonists, who are neither loyal, committed traditionalists nor ultramodern but life like. Such women have rediscovered and redefined their identity as new women.

References:

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