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JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACTUALIZATION: A STUDY OF GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

Dr. A. Nisha

Assistant Professor of English, Scott Christian College(Autonomous),
Nagercoil

Women novelists contribute a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Their writings provide insights, a wealth of understanding, reservoirs of meanings and a basis of discussion. In the galaxy of Indian novelists in English, Indian women writers too shine luminously like their male counterparts by their significant contribution to the enrichment of Indian English novels. They try to depict the ill-treatment, abuse and exploitation of the women in the male dominated society. In a conservative family, women feel like a caged bird fluttering its wings to break the cage open. These writers, through their writings, skillfully and successfully capture the Indian ethos. At the same time, they show their deep insight into human nature and understanding of day-to-day's problems. They analyze the sociocultural modes and values.

Githa Hariharan is primarily an Indian woman who explores through her fiction the meaning of life in a way the Indian writer continues to do. She, in her novels deals with themes like female subordination, male domination, oppression of women, patriarchal caste hierarchy, struggle for survival, quest for identity and alienation. Most of her novels are dealt with challenging tradition, pathetic condition of women in Indian society, superstitions, myths, religion, marriage, love and socio-cultural issues. Her role as a novelist is "a good deal of feminist writing in the field of culture has been concerned with the representation of gender and of women in particular" (Barker 316). Hariharan's works present the complexities of contemporary social life in a genuine manner. The quest for an authentic voice and all that it implies is what sets her novels apart. The basic problem in her novels is male chauvinism. The most prominent aspect of Hariharan's literary handling of diaspora is the use of woman as hero in the modern life and hence modern literature will allow anyone to be a hero not as a conqueror of fate but as a contender for full right over achieving a self forged identity.

Hariharan's novels bring alive the underworld of Indian woman's life where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival. Her novels present the effect of patriarchy on women of different social classes and ages and particularly the varied response to the restrictive institution of marriage. She shows that all through the ages the social has sustained the same ideal of womanhood by

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handing down behavioral patterns. She shows how each women character suffers from her own traumatic humiliation, guilt and alienation from her own body and process which originate in menarche in her novels. Through these representations she not only exposes how women are suppressed but also creates a narrative that challenges the ideology of womanhood.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi the protagonist is a plain looking young woman educated in the United States and returns to India. At the behest of her mother, she gets married to a diligent and serious minded business executive Mahesh. Soon she finds marriage a sort of solitary confinement, suffers a growing sense of futility, seeks escape in the company of a musical celebrity Gopal, remains for sometime on the fringes of the ambitious maestro's world of fans and fame and finally returns to the arms of her mother Sita, not a defeated or dejected ones, but a fugitive sure of her psychological awakening. She is determined "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning" (139).

Hariharan reveals the condition of women in the patriarchal society and their potential in defying the system and their struggle for an independent and dignified existence through wedding lock with their partners. In the novel the dream-like life of Devi comes to an end when she is married of to Mahesh, Devi's patriarchal husband after her return from America. Mahesh has everything a young lady can hope for. He has an executive job, a mansion in Bangalore and enormous riches. The novelist brings out as "Love, to cover my tormentor. I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, the passion of the sacrifice whole, all encompassing" (54). Thus Devi's husband fails to respect her individuality. She lacks love and freedom.

Mental illness may be more apparent than real or it may be the consequence of the unhealthy restrictions on an individual's perceptions. Social pressure forces people to repress their instinctive drives and reactions which constantly seek an outlet and thus create tension in their minds. This precisely is the predicament of the young girls as described by Beauvoir, "She does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society; thus she is divided against herself" (33). Society expects a woman to serve her husband or family without complaining. Feministic overtones of Hariharan are made audible to her readers in the course of her narration. She depicts how marriage brings on its way repression and depression and prevents women to show the tendency of escapism. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi's penance takes multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She feels suffocated in the atmosphere and plans definite means of escape. The act of walking out on Mahesh provides substance to her life and she considers it her first real journey. Gopal, the classical singer turned around and looked at Devi, his mouth twisting into a sardonic grin. This has another dimension too. When she elopes with Gopal, a Hindustani classical singer and an occasional visitor to her neighborhood, she knows she would not be happy with him. It is an act of penance, of protest against Mahesh and against her own self. Devi thinks, "he has sung for the right people to night" (134). He is a flirt with aspirations for an aristocratic way of life. She again leaves Gopal finally to return to her mother. The novelist describes as:

She covered the mirror with the silk so that the room suddenly became darker and everything, the beds, the table, the sleeping body of Gopal, were themselves again, no longer reflections. Devi left the silk sari behind, the Sari which was the color of the peacock's neck, when she boarded the train to Madras alone. She had felt bold and

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carefree when she left Mahesh's house, a little a heroine. (138)

The writer's compassion for woman as the worst sufferer in the patriarchal social order can be seen in her novel. She has seen through the hypocrisy of the system that overtly glorifies women but reality serves as a co-conspirator in converting, seducing and exploiting them. It could be said that marriage in feminist writing has been problematical and has been largely seen as a device of patriarchy to keep the woman in permanent subjugation to man.

Hariharan shows the insecurity that woman encounters in a patriarchal society finds expression. Devi's married life proves quiet unhappy. Being the wife of a manager of a multinational company, she is provided everything, but she finds something lacking in her life. Mahesh views the role of a wife as confined to house only. He gives neither physical nor verbal satisfaction to Devi. She no longer feels safe and secure with him. A few days before their wedding, Devi thinks, "Who was this man, this husband whose arms I was to lie in every night? Honor stories of perversion, blind bestial west and importance frightened me equally" (49). Now she feels the same strange feeling even after her marriage and she blames herself as "an aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck?" (14). Thus Devi feels insecurity in her husband's home.

Hesitation and submissiveness regarded as female virtues are not more to be found in the new women. The struggle of the women is directed at denouncing the age old gender difference entrenched in patriarchy for her privilege and writes as a human being and seek herself definition. Drabble, when asked about the limitation and freedom of woman she points out that "the whole human species is confronted with problems of limitations, not only the women" (138). She believes that women folk long for spiritual satisfaction and fulfillment and the gap between what they seek and what they find is great. No doubt, Hariharan's female characters seek female self-definition but the search for itself does not rely much on their gender, as on a life that is absurd and chaotic, contradictory as well as shifting. This realization comes to them through life which contains gaps between what one gets and what one really wants. The protagonists of Hariharan discover their selves at various situations. Aldama remarks, "Life is not a battle that one has to keep fighting for everything, but about survival, make sure you help fighting for everything, but about survival, make sure you help others survival as well. It's not about what we achieved but how we achieve it" (12). The sharper relevance of the whole issue is on universal suffering of women in the subcontinent.

Hariharan delineates significance and relevance of their sufferings from the period of the Ramayana and the *Mahabharatha* because from them Indian women draw their life models. Devi, the protagonist strives to preserve her life. She is "an uncompromising survival" (9). In her adolescence, Devi has listened to her grandmother's stories which are drawn from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Their focus is on women's pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. She remembers grandmother's narration of Gandhari. They are a prelude to her womanhood, an initiation into subterranean possibilities.

Gandhari's story is once again refelected in the life of Sita, Devi's mother. As Gandhari blindfolds her eyes after finding her husband Dhritrashtra blind, in the way Sita breaks the string of her veena when she is rebuked by her father-in-law for playing the veena at home one day. She also burns the photograph of herself holding with the veena to avoid obstacle memories. By stifling her own wishes, she transforms herself into an ideal daughter-in-law and breaks the veins of the veena. After that she

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decides not to play the veena in her life time. She sacrifices her passion on veena for the sake of being an ideal daughter-in-law. She breaks her veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice is never the sacrifice of weak. Towards the end of the novel, she acknowledges her selfhood and the needs of herself by playing veena in her home which was once broken. She plays to proclaim her independence and to welcome Devi. This shows her release of herself from the clutches of the past. She also exhibits courage and determination to take hold of her own life after her widowhood. Thus Sita, after her husband's death, comes over and regards Devi as the veena to rewind the spring season of her life with confidence.

The modern woman appears to be freer. The traditional woman was uneducated and easily ruled by her father, husband, brother or son. But the modern woman is not so. She is educated and has the ability to understand things. When the transformed woman revolts against the existing patriarchal system, men cannot locate it. Sometimes the woman thinks in terms of separation. The modern woman is different from her traditional counter-part because she is aware of herself and also economically independent. Gardiner points, "the post independent period witness a welcome change in the growth of woman from being a docile, domestic, passive, species to a reasonable, analyzing, educated individual who can take independent decisions not only for herself, but also for others"(42). In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, most of the women characters struggle for survival and to discover themselves. The characters struggle for some means of survival. Sita, Devi and Mayamma walk a tight rope and struggle for some balance to discover their selves. All the three suffer but it is Sita who wins the race. She likes an anchor supports herself as well as her embittered daughter. Even Mayamma exhibits fine resolve in the face of adversity. They represent three different generations, and more than thousand faces of women in India who still have no better existence than night.

Sita is a middle aged woman whose lot is little better than Mayamma's lot because she dominates the family because of her knowledge and awareness. In her desire to become a good wife and perfect daughter-in-law, she sacrifices her talent of music, but her desire could never be fulfilled, as a result of which she faces sense of discomfiture and futility. Sita is a very good wife of Mahadevan, her husband and a good mother to Devi. When she faces the extreme sufferings of her husband's death in abroad, she whimpers in her heart. With the sudden awakening in her mind, she boldly burns the uncompleted writings of her husband and comes to Madras with Devi. She decides to wear widowhood for the society. But the fire in her mind does not put off. It kindles her to flame when Devi comes to her home. She welcomes Devi and starts to face the hard realities with new enthusiasm.

Mayamma is a typical Indian woman who accepts her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as what she expects. She bears the brunt of cruelty that society has ordained for a woman as daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and mother. Hariharan represents the generation of Indian women who feel life is merely accepting and adjusting to one's destiny without complaints by following the Karma sutra. Women of her generation of Indian women who feel life is merely accepting and adjusting to one's destiny without complaint by following the Karma sutra. Women of her generation are meek, submissive bound to the traditions of family and the institution of marriage.

Psychological awakening is the highest ideal to every woman in her struggle ridden life to bring out her self-respect. These three women-Sita, Devi and Mayamma find a way to come to terms with their lives. Mayamma has learnt how to wait, how to bend her back and how to wipe her rebellious eyes

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dry. Being uneducated, Mayamma has no other way to survive. Once the astrologer said that Mayamma's son would have the fortune of being a nobleman. But he has tortured Mayamma to get a pair of diamond studs from her. When her son dies by the thrashings of the public, she puts his horoscope also in his last fire. It is the rebellious deed of Mayamma, but she does not have anyone to stay with. When Devi decides to come out of Mahesh's home she blesses Devi when leaves by saying "seek the river, miles away, where the dim forest gives way to clear transparent flood of light" (126). Her choice is to be fixed in her woman's role, but through Devi she can too see a different life.

Together with her disappointment, Devi realizes that all through her life, she is running away from her trials-America, the house of Jaro and road, Mahesh and Gopal. She has been living as a weak willed woman and she had allowed others to treat her string. Devi realizes that she has made very few choices in her life. Devi comes to know that this time is right to make choices in her life to write of the male scripts. She has to find her authentic self now, she knows if she does not act now, she would be forever condemned "to drift between worlds a floating island detached from the solidity of main land" (138). She wants to come back to her mother from Gopal, earlier she tries to escape through the flight of the imagination and through her identification with the male world. The novelist portrays the arrival of Devi as:

Suitcase in hand, Devi opened the gate and looked wonderingly at the garden, wild and over-grown, but lush in spite of its sand-choked roots. Then she quickened her footsteps as she heard the faint sounds of the veena heSitate and child like, inviting her into the house. (139)

Sita is also reborn through her daughter's adventures in life. She retrieves her lost self by returning to her music and to her veena. Sita has been the ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. When her ideal becomes ineffective and void, she is ready for self-examination. She "sat before the relic from the past, the broken veena, freshly dusted and waited for Devi to come back to her" (109). The inviting call of veena to Devi suggests a restoration of new positive relationship with mother, herself and the renewal of itself. Both Devi and Sita have liberated themselves from the pressures of feminine role-play to attain a true creative individuality. Now for both of them it is self, the genderless principal who is neither male nor female that is in quest of selfhood. Devi admires her strong and self willed mother. Sita and Devi share one thing in common. Both are strong willed. Devi empathizes with her mother for her strong resistance to patriarchy when she breaks her veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice has the force of the rebellion. However, in the bargain, what she loses is her own comfort, privacy and needs.

Through the women characters, Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* tries to show how women survive in male dominated society. A woman's flight from innocence to experience helps her in the process of self-actualization despite experiences of various hardships. They face all the problems in their lives and even survive with their inner strength, and this makes Hariharan's 'Feminism' typically Indian. They evolve a feminist understanding of the women's problem out of a purely Indian climate. The central experience in her fiction is authenticated by autobiographical overtones. Her feminism is not a copy of the western feminism. It is very much rooted in the Indian soil. She is quiet down to earth in her feminist approach to the women's problem.

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