

Reworking The Feminine Qualities From Traditionalism To Postmodernism: A Re-Examining Of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces Of Night

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ABSTRACT

Indian women novelists have expanded the literary canon of India. Indian Writing in English has increased over a period of time and has observed numerous modifications in the forms of writing. Women writers have integrated the often-expressed women experiences into their writings, thereby influencing the cultural and linguistic moulds and models of Indian literature. This infusion of feminist ideologies has gradually started to shape English Literature in India over the years. Women's writing has been reflected on as an influential means of modernist and feminist statements. Women writers focus on both contemporary topics that are highly relevant to women and concerns that have long been in society. Their articles offer an insight into the inaccessible, uncharted feminine psyche. They also portray the psychological anguish of the dissatisfied women. Githa Hariharan's writings are found to be postmodern multi-layering of differences in feminism. She aspires to represent the struggle of women in the transition between tradition and modernity. This is very evident in Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. This Paper discusses how Hariharan's traditional and modern women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* employ survival strategies to overcome the challenging situations by accepting the harsh realities surrounding them.

Key Words: gender inequality, identity crisis, convention, exploitation, patriarchy

Introduction

Human beings are complicated machines with a wide range of models of dominance and surrender in power struggles. Inequality between men and women can take many different forms. It has several facets, and occasionally there is little connection between the various asymmetries. One of India's most prolific women writers and social activists, Githa Hariharan is renowned for her concern and care for women. The author Githa Hariharan depicts a varied assortment of women characters, blending elements of mythology and actuality in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Githa Hariharan investigates an extensive range of wishes, disillusionments, desires and agonies, each one on a voyage of self-discovery and liberation through these characters.

Githa Hariharan's narrative in *The Thousand Faces of Night* though looks traditional outwardly, explores the intricacies of women characters seriously. She exhibits the continuous conflict between modernity and tradition by skilfully discussing and bargaining the dichotomy of "good" and "bad"

women. There are many women characters like Devi, Sita, Pati, Parvatiamma, and Mayamma in the novel and their stories demonstrate the prototype of the lives of women in Hindu cultural civilization in a lucid, short and snappy manner. Moreover, many mythological and legendary women characters like Sita, Amba, Gandhari, Ganga, and Gauri

also appear in the novel and though there are noteworthy gaps in time between these stories of mythological women and those of the women in the novel, the narrative impeccably connects them. These women are connected by their same experiences of unrealized aspirations, dreadful marriages, and identity searches. The mythological stories of women and the tales of the ordinary working-class women in the novel are put adjacent to each other and analysed. But the mythological stories provide assistance to supplement questioning the confused state of affairs of the contemporary individuals rather than supplying straightforward answers. The main character does not agree them at face value but confronts the ethical values these myths endeavour to convey and looks for new ways to understand them. This system facilitates an all-inclusive examination of the complicatedness and intricacy that women face in both historical and modern scenario.

Traditionalism to Postmodernism

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the main character, Devi, follows the norms and rules framed by the society but still she struggles with her identity. Two opposite forces always clash in her mind - modernism and tradition, Eastern and Western cultures, the mind and the emotions, and the idea of being a "good girl" or a "bad girl." There is a perpetual pain and agony in her mind whether, "to be or not to be a good girl," and the myths which she was told in her childhood used to aggravate her struggle with identity.

Three men, Dan, Mahesh and Gopal come in her life and Devi sees herself put in many positions when she interacts with these men. She is a charismatic entity of craving for Dan, a homemaker and hostess who greets her husband Mahesh as if he were a visitor, and a singer to the musician Gopal. She is not able to fully live in any of these positions, though. Devi comes to the realization that each of these men has their own distinct identity, and she is expected to subsume her own identity within theirs, further deepening her sense of disconnection and alienation. She is raised in a Hindu household where it is expected of her to be a good girl and a virtuous woman in order to fit in with the man she loves. When she learns that, in a patriarchal culture like India, men govern the world, she has a problem. She also discovers that women are brought up with different expectations in India. Devi immediately breaks free of it upon realising this, discovering her own identity and uniqueness.

The author then delves into the life of Devi following the marriage arranged by her mother. Devi's husband Mahesh treats Devi shabbily. Devi finds it hard to become accustomed to the new environment. She feels lonely, miserable, and unsatisfied. Devi says,

"This then is marriage, the end of ends; two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood." (TTFN: 54).

Devi finds comfort in the company of her father-in-law who feeds back into her "good girl syndrome" during her lonely moments. Through literature on philosophy, he leads her to the goal of being a moral and virtuous wife. However, as Devi continues to observe the world around her, particularly through the lens of Mayamma, the housekeeper, who shares stories in her father-in-law's absence, she becomes increasingly aware of the repression faced by women. This awareness sparks a transformation within Devi as the burgeoning sense of frustration and rebellion begins to overshadow her compliance. The "bad girl" within her begins to assert it, challenging the constraints imposed upon her by societal norms and expectations.

In addition to Devi, the novel looks into the lives of other women characters, such as Sita, Devi's mother, who sacrifices her musical career to discharge the job of a perfect daughter in-law; Mayamma, the housemaid, who endures infertility, brutality, and abuse until the tragic loss of her son; and the maid-servant Gauri eventually falls in love with her brother-in-law, despite her initial goal of saving money for her wedding.

Devi begins to speculate about the importance and consequences of these tales of women in her life as she travels through them and also contemplates on the mythology that surrounds them. She endeavours to build her own individuality and uniqueness and begins to ascertain her own self and identity. Devi courageously

affirms her personality and independence by denying becoming a mother and resisting social pressure to become pregnant for the sake of becoming a traditionalist. Devi challenges the conventional and traditional regulations and rules, in quest of finding her own path and destiny. She makes up her mind to go away from her husband's house and go with Gopal after being enthused by her mother-in-law, who went from the house of her husband to find an existence of pious and holy path. She is hopeful in the beginning and has a purpose at first, but she soon faces more severe existential challenges. Devi finds herself becoming a little more than an object as she becomes more and more embedded in the life of Gopal and realises her life has become meaningless and worthless. Her deep and insightful search for her own identity and place in the world is ignited by this profound understanding.

Devi becomes reflective and comes to a strong realization that she has passed her entire life attempting to live as a 'good' girl and striving hard to meet the expectations of the society at the end of her journey in life. She has performed the part of the 'other' in the lives of the three dissimilar men throughout her life. She has felt ensnared, annoyed, troubled and agitated by these roles. Devi is conscious and alert that, like many of the contemporary women in her surroundings, she has been compelled to be conventional to the obsolete or imaginary and fictional ideal of the "virtuous woman." She opts to fight against because she understands that trying to live up to these mythical standards will only make her discontented and make her life miserable.

Devi resolves to stop battling with her true self, choosing instead to resolve her inner conflict. She decides that from now on, she will live for herself and no longer seek to satisfy others. This decision marks a pivotal shift; she embraces the label of the 'bad girl,' breaking free from societal myths and expectations. Ultimately, Devi returns to her mother, ready to redefine her individuality and reclaim her sense of self.

Sita, Devi's mother, is likewise harmed. Twenty-year-old married, she visits her in-laws' home having a "resolve to be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law" (TTFN: 36).

In her quest to uphold amity and peace and embody the ideal wife and daughter-in-law, she makes a significant sacrifice: giving up her beloved veena. One morning, as her father-in-law prepares for his daily prayers in front of the gods, he realizes he is missing something essential. He calls out for Sita, but she does not hear him. Instead, he hears the melodic strains of the veena approaching from her room. He roars,

"Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (TTFN:

30) This seems to be a call for self-sacrifice. Rukmini Bhaya Nair says,

"Women, conventionalized into their roles of wives, sisters and mothers have, as a result remained within a powerful cross cultural metaphor that violently divides the genders making as all, in one way or another, victims of Lawrence's Pansay-Syndrome." (Nair 9)

This incident highlights that in a male-dominated society, a woman's individuality and uniqueness are often defined solely by her relationships and roles within the family. She is expected to be the perfect wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and homemaker, with little regard for her individuality. Overwhelmed by frustration and anger, Sita burns all her pictures in which she has posed with her veena, symbolically rejecting the erasure of her personal identity. This is done to stay away from "obsolete memories" (TTFN: 104). Henceforth, she becomes "a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised" (TTFN: 30).

A first-class perfect wife is traditionally referred to as a "good woman," and like Sita and Savitri, a good wife must be chaste, devoted, and moral.

"For both men and women in Hindu society the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the *Ramayana*, as the quintessence of wifely devotion" (Uma Chakravarti, 70).

A woman's identity and her perception of the self are seen in connection with others. The Indian community expects every woman to merge herself with her husband. This implies that a woman has to sacrifice her 'self' and avoid attainment of a distinct 'selfhood'. In Indian culture, marriage is a revered institution in which the wife, the Ardhagini, is the half of a man and, paradoxically, gives herself up to her husband.

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Sita's husband, Mahadevan, is shown as emotionally

impassive. His failure to evoke any deep feelings in Sita leads to her growing sense of alienation from him. Their marriage feels like a burdensome journey, with them moving forward like two oxen yoked

together. Often, women's 'self-sacrifice' stunts their personal growth. Women are so conditioned to focus on others' emotions and reactions that they neglect to express their own feelings.

Wifehood is regarded as the primary objective for women, with every married woman expected to excel in this role. Sita, unable to pursue her musical talent, redirects her efforts towards influencing and shaping the existence of her husband and daughter. This is a subdued demonstration of women strength as she guides and supports her husband through each stage, helping him climb the corporate ladder until he joins the elite group of rapidly advancing executives earning three thousand a month. Similarly, Mayamma's sorrowful story mirrors the common experiences of many women. Her suffering "exemplify the inflexible constraints that identify a woman with the undesirable attributes of 'dependence', 'passivity' and 'masochism'" (Nair 77- 78).

She experiences pain because of the brutality of her despotic spouse. Firmly entrenched in her stereotypically feminine role, she accepts her misfortune as the result of fate and bravely puts up with emotional and physical abuse from her spouse and mother-in-law. To understand Mayamma's mother-in-law requires insight into the Indian cultural ethos, where a son is seen as a source of support in the later age of life. Her frustration stems from Mayamma's inability to bear children. Additionally, Mayamma's sense of security is threatened by her husband's lack of emotional connection to her. Mayamma's grandmother holds her responsible for a number of adversities, including a stillborn child, her husband's desertion, and extreme poverty. Despite these accusations, Mayamma remains unable to resist, as tradition dictates that a bride should not have a say of her own. In conventional and traditional societies, women who unconditionally accept their assigned roles often find a sense of fulfillment within them. As Kakkar says, "The bride usually occupies one of the lowest rungs. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the elder woman of the family, especially those of her mother-in-law, are expected as a matter of course" (Kakkar 73- 74).

Devi acquiesces to the authoritarian ideals that state women are "just 'dolls' for men." Doll-like girls who never challenge men's opinions or conduct are generally preferred by them. Mayamma, Mahesh's housekeeper, too experiences physical and psychological abuse. Her spouse beats, smacks, kicks, strikes, and engages in forceful sexual activity. Since she is not able to become a mother, her trauma gets aggravated by her uncaring husband who "woke her up every night, his large, hairy thighs and heavy on her, pushing, pushing" (80). She hums the tune while making a "Kolam" when she becomes reminiscent of a song her mother used to sing. Her husband comes like a persecutor at her back and yells, "so you've taken to saying in the streets, have you, you shameless hussy" (111).

Devi recalls him as an unkind man, often snorting like an annoyed bull. Although Mayamma's husband absconds and leaves her, seemingly freeing her from his meanness, his departure only deepens her suffering. By abandoning his responsibilities, he leaves her to care for his mother, their son, and herself entirely on her own. Unable to let go of her protracted ordeal of suffering, she finds refuge at Parvatiamma's house when her son passes away.

Githa Hariharan reveals the ways in which print, TV serials, and commercials perpetuate and elevate specific stereotypes about women, and how they are expected of them. These ideas, which define Indian women, are also represented in prayers:

"Like Sati you must burn yourself to death, like Sati you must vindicate your husband's honour and manhood. Like Hemavati you must turn that black skin on your sinful body into golden sheen of light and beauty. Like Gauri, you must reap the bountiful harvest that will be yours if you embrace the lingam on the sacrificial alter." (TTFN: 94)

After a year of marriage, Devi's cousin Uma is similarly abandoned where she also experiences severe abuse from her father-in-law and abuse from her husband. She accepts her fate with quiet resignation and lives an unhappy existence.

For an Indian woman, her role is often confined to an emotional self-immersion that leads to self-negation and frequently results in exploitation and conflict. In the novel's portrayal of women, there are two distinct groups: those who submit to the dominant societal norms for validation and those who seek inner validation in their quest for a free self. The first group follows the prescribed path of the community, ensuring their safety through a fearful survival strategy. In contrast, the second group faces the embarrassment and challenges of lacking social support. Mayamma represents the first group, falling a victim to the patriarchal pressures in her struggle to survive. Conversely, women like Devi and Sita represent the second group,

rejecting the hegemonic structure in their pursuit of identities beyond that of mere housewives.

Conclusion

In Hariharan's writings, the women protagonists struggle against the assumption that wedding and motherliness are the final and eventual aim of the "ideal woman." They are authentic depictions of modern Indian women leading a quiet revolution. Here, they are adamantly in support of the third wave of feminism and individual emancipation. From her analysis of women characters, Githa Hariharan offers the readers with insight into the heritage and culture of India and the place of women in Indian society. The novel tells the story of the women in India searching for their identity as they travel from tradition to modernity. It also talks about the solutions. It clarifies for us how characters from mythology and modern times manage to be helpless victims. Hariharan brings up social, cultural, and ethical issues. Hariharan envisions women as empowered individuals. In order to find her actual identity and return to her mother or her roots, the protagonist ultimately repudiates her status as the "other."

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