

MYTHS RETOLD IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan's first Commonwealth Award winning novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is read as a revision of myth-making novel in which the novelist attempts to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths. India is one of the most ancient countries with rich heritage and traditional values. The present study endeavors to scrutinize the role, myth plays on Devi and Sita and how the narration of myths and stories changes whenever they are narrated and passed on from one generation to another. The novel is not only the story of Devi, but also that of Sita, her mother, and the old woman, Mayamma, which are interlinked with myth and stories narrated by Devi's grandmother and her father in law. Within the frame work of her own life story, they rewrite these stories, observe and hear strategies of women which help them to learn themselves that survival is the highest ideal in a struggle filled life of women.

Keywords: Scrutinize, Sacrifice, Fling, Adulthood.

Githa Hariharan acknowledges confidently that as a writer she is particularly concerned with women's issues and is proud to call herself a feminist. "I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choice have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice" (web 4-10-2019).

Githa Hariharan says in an interview with Arnab Chakladar, "In her very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, she focuses on the inner life of women bringing out in detail their inner spaces, by rewriting and retelling myths from the female point of view"(web 4-12-201. Besides George Thomson describes his view point of mythology as, "Mythology operates in and through the imagination"(65).

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a novel about women and men, love and death, story and myth, passion and loneliness. The novel is woven around three women Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, who belong to three different generations. Through their stories the author shows how despite the generations, background, and the education that an Indian woman attains, her fate is to fall back into customs for centuries. Each of the three women has her own story to tell. Devi, the daughter educated in America, married to Mahesh. Sita, the mother sacrificing herself to the cause of order and progress and Mayamma, the old servant, married when still a girl to a drunken lout and abused by husband, mother-in-law, and son. Though each story is separated, they are interlinked to each other.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a linear realistic story of an Indian girl. On the surface story of Devi, the protagonist of the novel, is grown up listening to the stories of her grandmother. The author explores the ideas of what makes a dutiful daughter, wife, mother and what makes a good Indian woman. Devi, the narrator retells or rewrites stories she observes or listens to. Through their stories the author displays the gender injustice in community by linking women's lives and struggle across generations and barriers of caste and class. In the course of the novel, stories are retold in different ways from the feminist point of view.

The paper focuses on the important myths. Devi's mother Sita who was a strong self-willed woman tries to fulfill the role of a dutiful daughter, dutiful wife, dutiful mother all through her life. Her grandmother was a more simple and realistic person. Her grandmother's stories had a great impact on Devi. She had the habit of narrating stories from the Puranas in answer to Devi's queries. "No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it turned it inside out, and cooked up her own home-made yardsticks for life"(20).

Devi's grandmother's version of the stories of Ganga, Gandhari, and Amba has a profound influence on Devi as they are heard during her most important phases of life. Her grandmother is the first person to know when Devi attains puberty. Surprisingly she advises her not to tell anyone as she would be isolated for three days. She never said anything about bodily functions and changes; instead just comments, "It means you are a woman now, my child. It means that you will be a mother"(88) and continues "motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast. A mother has to walk strange and tortuous paths"(88).

As usual the grandmother narrates a story to make her understand the mystery of life. Devi is frightened and does not like the story of Ganga. The narration of Shanthanu's love for Ganga and her puzzling act of throwing seven new born sons every year in the swirling waters of Ganga is not understood at first by Devi, one of the reasons being Devi never asks question so that the story telling would go quicker. But at the later stage after her marriage when she is not ready for a child she confesses, "But I know now what she would have said, to be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to earn the little, just as you have to renew your wifely vows every day"(89).

While the old myths hint at the primitive time when child sacrifice was a custom to redeem one's sin, Devi's grandmother stresses on the pain because she can't bear a child for several years. Her husband and mother-in-law torture her physically who suffers the most, due to patriarchal dictums ordained to woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman, and a mother. Ganga has to bear while flinging her new born children in the river to redeem the adversity and forsake her husband.

Devi understands her mother and learns of her parents' weaknesses through the story of Gandhari. An old photograph of her mother with veena surprises Devi. She asks her grandmother whether her mother used to play veena. At once her grandmother gets the exalted story - look on her face and compels her to listen to the story of Gandhari in *The Mahabharatha*. Gandhari is glorified as an ideal wife for sacrificing her vision. When she realises that her

husband had "white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless"(29). The story of Sita breaks the chords of veena when her father is angry when she does not help him in the poojaroom. Her husband's angry words, "Put veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?"(30) makes Sita pull out the strings of her precious veena. After this incident she never touches it though she used to play so beautifully, rather "she becomes a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbors praised, and our household never heard that heart-rending music again"(30).

While Sita practices the sacrificing duty of a wife in real life, Devi thinks otherwise " I listened to my grandmother's interpretation of Gandhari's choice but the lesson I learned was different. The lessons brought me five steps closer to adulthood"(29). Though she was unconsciously aware at that time "that Gandhari's pride, the furry that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind, suffering was no piece of fiction"(29). She could identify this anger in her mother, "I saw, for the first time, that my parents too were afflicted by a kind of blindness. In their blinkered world they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the group of another"(29).

Devi wishes that Uma her cousin takes revenge against her husband and father-in-law like Amba. Her grandmother's narration of the story of Amba questions her and she returns to her parental home. Uma had an unfortunate marriage, married into a wealthy family, to an alcoholic husband. Uma returns home. The grandmother consoles herself and Devi. The princess Amba was abducted by the Great Warrior Bheeshma, when she is about to garland her lover, the king of Salwa. Though she returns to him he refuses to accept her. Amba is filled with anger and revenge. She is reborn as Drupada's daughter, raised as a son, and becomes the cause of Bheeshma's death.

These stories help to establish a link with lived experience. Though grandmother's stories are not about usual heroes and heroines, the characters Gandhari, Amba and Ganga are portrayed in the novel as true heroines of endurance and resilience. Eventhough they are relegated to minority status in the society and their sacrifices are far forgotten in the patriarchal versions of myth, their subjugation, tolerance and emergence as iron-hearted soul gives new energy and vitality to the subjugated women folk of the world. The stories of victorious women in the myth induces positive vibe in Devi. Devi uses the predicament and experiences of women in the mythology to fight against the evils in the society. They serve as an eye-opener and icon to Devi.

Baba, her father-in-law like her grandmother, is also a story teller. His stories are typically from the man's point of view. "His stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their center point on exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife"(51).

Baba tries to establish the patriarchal setup of Indian society. Baba's story of Muthuswamy Dikshitar reveals this ambivalence. It is the tale of a saint and his two wives. Dikshitar's first wife was a good woman but not good enough because, she was as dark as the sky on the moonless night. To save their son from temptation, Dikshitar's parents found another wife for him, a beautiful and fair woman. In the Indian context being a good woman alone is not

sufficient in marital relationship, physical beauty is also essential.

The unending list of her grandmother's stories makes her day dream more about female avenges and desire to become a warrior and a heroine. Devi thus visualizes herself as "I lived a secret life of my own. I become a women warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demon's head's"(41). Though Baba speaks about the respect for women in his stories, he always depicts the hypocritical views of patriarch. Thus in the course of the novel these stories are retold in different ways. The meaning of these stories changes from person to person.

So, old stories change whenever they are narrated and passed on from one generation to another. According to Vijayashree, Adrienne Rich's words on retelling of the past

is not just an act of looking back, of seeing with the fresh eyes of entering an old text from a new critical direction, no it is more than that, namely it is an act of survival for Indian women. Revisioning myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and manmade laws are subverted. (179)

Thus Devi rewrites her stories within her own life which forms the best outline of the plot. Hariharan's story is a metaphor of complex myths that open the life of passive women It depicts the predicament of women who have a thousand faces as everlasting, sufferings, ambitions untold sagas imprisoned in a closed frame of mythology scripted by the society. Divyarajan Bahuguna rightly says, "while this novel successfully represents traditional Indian values and integrates it with modern thinking it is basically a feminist writing in which myths are reviewed and retold from a woman's point of view"(77-78).

To conclude Hariharan uses the myths deeply rooted in Indian culture to question gender injustice and the place of Indian women and their potentialities. Devi, Sita, and Mayamma suffer and struggle to cope with the traditional roles assigned to them. Not only Devi, but every Indian woman goes through the anguish of finding an answer as to who is an ideal wife, mother, and daughter. Even the goddesses and the heroic actions of Indian myths and epics are set as role models they do not escape the hand of patriarchal manipulation, as an Indian woman's identity is traditionally confined and defined by the social and the cultural norms. They belong to their father before they are married and to their husband after they are married and in the old age they have to depend upon their sons. They have no independent status or identity. This is the message that Devi gets not only from her personal experience but also along with her observations of her mother Sita's life and Mayamma's victimization. Her father-in-law's stories also convey the unfortunate destiny of an Indian woman. Reflecting over three lives, Devi feels that Mayamma, Sita, and she herself has done enough tight rope walking. It's time they stop the struggle for balancing themselves within the family and stand freely in all their dignity without any appendages.

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