

Creating Spaces: The Wounded Women Psyche in the Selected Novels of Jaishree Misra and Githa Hariharan

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Abstract

Any surface layer of literature cannot ignore the undercurrents that shape its existence. Writers, women writers in particular, knowingly or unknowingly, are absorbed into the myriad forces which shape the experience of women in society. Being conscious of women's marginalization in a society where male formulate the rules of living, they cannot deny or ignore the forces working towards women's subjugation. The identity of woman has been harmed and twisted and her very position as human being is subjugated under the overpowering male-domination. Jaishree Misra and Githa Hariharan, by and large, centre their novels on the marriages of their women protagonists, revealing in the process, the power relations, gender discriminations and the travails of a woman in the family, which gives as picture of the position of the Indian women in society. Marriage is generally viewed as the objective and fate of women and therefore it plays an important role in their lives. But unfortunately, it leads them to their confinement within the parameters men mark out for them. Woman's position in the family appears to be paradoxical as she is subjugated and suppressed and yet she is indispensable for running the family. The spouse has taken a wife to be a quiet helper and partner in his life. They have never regarded her to be an individual of flesh and blood with sentiments like themselves. The present paper is focused on the sufferings of being a woman and how they resolve their oppression and emerge as strong and authentic individuals.

Key Words: *patriarchy, gender oppression, subjugation, quest for identity, self-discovery*



Recently, the socio-economic changes and access to education have made woman conscious of her rights and she now begins to refuse to be servile to her husband. Though the well-educated woman of at present has progressed far ahead of her forerunners, still she cannot refute the truth that even today man determines her fate to a certain extent. She finds herself landed in a dilemma as she is also pulled by the traditional role society thrusts upon her. For Misra's and Hariharan's protagonists, discord or disappointment in marital relationships is the starting point for introspection and later self-realization. They do not acknowledge to be thought about objects of delight, defy their exploitation and look for a new balance of power between the sexes. Their central female characters feel they have been put in chains and they should free themselves to begin life afresh. Marriage never provides the sense of security, freedom and happiness that the protagonists expect from it. Angry and hurt by the injustice that is inflicted upon them, they refuse to live a life of passivity and submission that was the lot of their predecessors.

In two of the novels under study-Jaishree Misra's *Afterwards* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the female protagonists resent the inequality and gender-oppression built in the relationship, the compulsion of role-playing and division of labour, which govern all patriarchal marriages. The power equations in *Afterwards* and *The Thousand Faces of Night* which briefly, succinctly delineate the complexities of man-woman relationship as dominant husbands like Govind and Mahesh expect their wives to comply and surrender to their androcentric ego. The relationships, which are under tensions and duress, expect Maya or Devi to deny themselves, their uniqueness and personality and include their identity in her husband's, if the marriage is to be guarded. The protagonists, Maya and Devi are all women of deep emotions and fine sensitivities entrapped in marriage with men who are never out rightly cruel but they are insensible to their wives' pleas for understanding, communication and respect for their individuality. Such emotionally incomplete relationships have a fatal effect and Misra's and Hariharan's women find themselves tortured by a painful sense of alienation and an excruciating loneliness of the spirit.

The selfless, enduring and self-denying woman, with her archetypal features, starts to dislike the pressures of supporting patriarchal genderisation, seems stifled in her limited sphere, questioning the insight of following the footsteps of Sita and conveys the impression to sense the want for equity and autonomy and means of life other than in wedding. Maya in *After wards* had to wrestle with herself to leave behind the mental shackles with which she was chained down emotionally in the house of her family. Even within the narrow confines of her life as the wife of Govind, she manages to assert herself. She considers her husband's attempts to take over her mind as subjection beyond the bounds of decency. Maya overcomes the weakness of her heart and fills with newly gained strength through the notions of female emancipation injected to her mind by Rahul Tiwari. She chooses freedom against traditional slavery. When her husband beats her, she quits her spouse's home forever and goes with Rahul. It is only when Maya is with Rahul, she experiences a new sense of personal freedom and an affirmation of self. From then on she pilots her own life. Maya's choice of the course of liberty against orthodox submission symbolizes a spark of revolution among Indian women.

As in *Afterwards*, in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, too, the character of the imposing and oppressive male is repeated and a similar power struggle is depicted between a husband and a wife. Mahesh is possessive and wants to transform Devi into his personal property and Devi like Maya, struggles to acquire some space in his male-centred set up. She is expected to be a passive, compliant and self-effacing wife who must make a Victorian surrender of identity to her husband's wishes and, like the Duchess in Browning's *My Last Duchess*, must learn to behave discreetly as her husband wishes. But the traits of the 'New Woman' with which Devi is endowed, her education, selfhood and a modern liberated sensibility, expose the chauvinism of their relationship. Devi projects the ambivalence to submit and submerge herself on one hand and on the other to resent Mahesh's possessiveness and highlight the irrationality and unfairness of his suffocating and egocentric demand.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan produces an interesting display of woman characters who endure within the structure of marriage. Hariharan juxtaposes two kinds of women- women who are ready to submit to the custom-bound restrictions of matrimonial life and women who, when humiliations and injustices do seriously upset their self-esteem, do not delay to insurgent and rebellion. Mayamma and Sita belong to the first category and they are self-sacrificing women who are paragons of virtue and high ideals and who try to collaborate with patriarchy in the maintenance of its institutions. These women are tragic victims of circumstances and their idealistic commitments often fail to achieve the desired goal. Woman like Devi's mother devalue dimensions of female potential and emerging identities and either resign themselves to eternal pessimism or live in self-deluding fantasies. The weak-willed and self-pitying passive woman becomes the symbol of three edicts: taboos, non-existence and silence-which haunt a woman's life even today. But some characters like Devi and Parvathi, though they are steeped in Hindu value system, manage to find space and scope for revolt within the institution they conform to, and finally they become self-actualised persons.

The central female characters under analysis discover themselves stressed out with the existing social standards of demeanour. They show uncommon mettle and strength of mind and rise above the restrictions of the social order to move forwards to the objectives they set for themselves. In the selected novels, the conventional models of the ideal mother and the ideal wife are subverted. The central female characters in their narratives express deep discontent, distress and restlessness. They are not the stoic and resilient paradigm of feminine virtues, but physically, emotionally and psychologically fragmented characters who are unable to derive lasting fulfillment from identification with the stereotyped ideal mothers and wives. Discontentment is felt against total subordination and indoctrination. The need for survival in a cold and aggressive world demands action, mobility and assertion, and an inevitable metamorphosis of one's 'naturalistic' traits. From the meek and docile subordinate to the strong, self-reliant and independent woman, the female character seems to promise, a totally inverted identity and reconstituted ideological thought.

References

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