

Women Battling for Space in Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Women Battling for Space in Gita Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night” is an attempt to analyse Hariharan's (her) first novel The Thousand Faces of Night, which highlights the survival of women belonging to three different generations. This is a novel of three women Sita, Devi and Mayamma. They represent three different generations and more than thousand faces of women in India who still have no better existence than night. Delimiting restrictions through self analysis and self discovery, all the three main female characters try to create both physical as well as psychological space for themselves to grow on their own. The inner conscience of the Indian Psyche and the social relations are based on the traditional image of ideal womanhood even in the changed (social/historical) context. They rebel against the dictates of their domestic duties and social sanctions, (and) challenge male devised orthodoxies about women's nature, capacities and roles and existential insecurity. Hariharan attempts to project the large society as a whole through her characters of three different generations. Her novel mainly delineates the awakening of women's consciousness which impels her to strive for self-actualization.

Keywords: Self analysis, Self discovery, Self-actualization, Womanhood, Women's consciousness.

Githa Hariharan has been hailed (considered) as one of the women writers producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. She is very clear about what she writes. In an interview with Arnab Chakladar, Gita Hariharan answers confidently that she is a writer particularly concerned with women's issues and that she is a feminist. She says, I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choice have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. I want to say this because many women are very anxious for some reason to say ‘I am a humanist not a feminist’, that sort of thing . . . we can't be wary of the word feminist

because there are people in the world who misunderstand the word or have done disservice to the word . . . you can't use most words then! and anyway however you define yourself all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. . . . so the answer to your question would be that I am a writer as opposed to a women writer, who is a feminist along with several other things! ("A Conversation with Gita Hariharan")

Githa Hariharan enjoys a crucial place in the history of Indian English Fiction. On the one hand she is an integral part of the larger part of the tradition, on the other hand, she is an important cord in the tradition of Indian women writers. The age of Githa Hariharan is undisputedly the most complex phase of the cultural history of India. There were quick transitions and subtle and unpredictable changes that redefined the identity of individual in general and of a woman in particular.

Githa Hariharan was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, India to a Tamil Brahmin family from Palghat, South India. She grew up in Bombay. Her father was a journalist for a leading Indian newspaper The Times of India. She worked in Bombay, Madras and New Delhi as an editor. She had a happy childhood. She was a voracious reader and grew up in the intoxicating company of books, feeding on the early diet of Victorian classics and moving on to discover the delights of the Japanese novels. Her training in Indian carnatic music developed a deep love for it, a love that later diversified to include jazz within its ambit and spilled over into the symphonic organization of her fiction

Githa Hariharan's published works include novels, short stories, essays, newspapers, articles and columns. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Common Wealth writers prize in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and the new *Fugitive Histories* (2009). It was during a maternity leave that Hariharan's literary career started. She says: "It was when I got pregnant and went away on maternity leave that I got the courage to say all right, I'm not going back, and I started working seriously on *The Thousand Faces of Night*" ("A Conversation").

Githa Hariharan is passionately engaged in the world she lives in, wanting at the same time to change all the inequities it breeds, tolerates and promotes. She certainly has a lot of questions about the society she lives in as well as about the world this society is part of. She is a

skilful literary artist who does not fashion her thoughts to accommodate her incidents, but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique factor to be wrought out, she invents such incidents and then combines such incidents and events as may best aid her in establishing this preconceived effect.

Githa Hariharan's very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* won the Common Wealth prize. In this novel Githa Hariharan denounces subservience of Indian women and advocates their emancipation from the bondage of male domination. Githa Hariharan sets out to focus the inner life of women bringing out in detail their inner spaces, to reveal the hidden patterns to oppression across time and space. The novel is also about love and death, about women and men, story and myth, passion and loneliness. It was woven around three high caste women, western educated – Devi is the central character in the novel. She likes Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. She has to endure persecution in her social life. The novel presents a vivid picture of patriarchal dominance in social life, besides striking a note of feminist approach on the theme of women psychology. In fact, globally the psychological suffering of the women is not so intense and heart-touching like that of an Indian woman because of the liberty they enjoy. As they can break any kind of bondage to revolt against any kind of persecution, they have no such cultural concept of subordination of women to men.

Devi, the protagonist of the novel, returned from America to India after the accomplishment of her education. Her mother was alone as her father had already died. Her mother, Sita was very cautious about her daughter's future and married life. Sita kept on searching for a suitable match for Devi. Proposed boys and their family members came to meet Devi and Devi's horoscope was taken to the astrologer to get it match with the proposed ones. In this series of meetings, Mahesh came. Devi met and accepted him who had already been chosen by Sita. His job is touring and he says, "I will be in Bangalore only ten days of the month" (22). After great festive and religious rituals, they both became husband-wife according to the Hindu rites. After marriage, "When Mahesh left this morning on his monthly tour, I felt like a child whose summer holiday had slipped away from her" (50).

As time passed, the things had started to take their true and actual shape. Mahesh expresses no sense of respect for Devi's emotions and feelings. Devi wants to learn Sanskrit so that she may be able to understand the real meaning of Baba's quotations. But when she tells her

desire to Mahesh, he very rudely says, “Don’t be foolish . . . There is so much for you to do at home” (52). And to which she replies, “I must look for a job . . . I could look for some kind of a job” (55). He snubs her by saying, “And what will you do when the baby comes?” (65). He never misses any chance to insult her. On her request to postpone his trip, without taking into consideration the love and emotions of Devi for him, in a chiding manner he says, “Why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth, he teased. ‘Then I won’t have to make a living at all’” (54).). Devi’s rebellion comes out in monologues punctuated with interrogative:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting like liquid wax burned by moonlight? (74)

Awareness of being a woman is associated with motherhood. This aspect is brought to the readers’ mind through Mayamma’s story. It is natural for a woman to be proud of her sexuality but society prevents her from feeling such pride. In Indian society, women having their menses are disallowed from temples and from participating in any religious ceremonies. Mayamma attains puberty as she is playing in the temple. In an ironic sense, her sexuality can be considered a divine gift, but the priest, the male bastion of religiosity and upholder of the patriarchal norms said that Mayamma’s womanhood has tainted the purity of the temple. Mayamma is the caretaker of Devi’s in-law’s house. Mayamma is married at the age of twelve to a useless gambler. Her husband called her “a shameless hussy” (111). After her marriage, when Mayamma failed to conceive, it brings bundle of sorrows and sufferings for her. Her husband kicked her, “after a night of whoring in the rain” yesterdays rice when two years of marriage would not bring forth a child. Her mother-in-law alleges: “What kind of a girl is this . . . she eats as much as anybody else, but is barren. Her horoscope is a lie she will have to do penance to change its course” (80).

One day her mother-in-law beats her, “What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch? She pulled up my sari roughly . . . smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my barrenness” (113) because she was found admiring her new sari later she asked her cut her breast open and “Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam”

(113) in order to please the gods to beget a son. She is unproductive. So it is considered as her fault only. Her husband is not at all blamed for it. Her mother-in-law's attitude was devilish as "she tore my new saris and gave me yesterday's rice to eat. What is the use of feeding a barren woman?" (112). For Mayamma's husband, she is only a means to satisfy his carnal desires. "He snorted like an angry bull. He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow. I was a silly little girl then, his grunting frightened me. If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with the other" (118).

Mayamma's husband hits her with an iron frying pan when she refused to give him her diamond earrings. He threatened and cursed and even beat his mother till he finally caught fever and died. The day he died Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. "She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handi work: now all these had been snatched from her" (82). On that day leaving behind a home forever Mayamma came to Parvathiamma's house and stayed there slogging in the kitchen. In spite of all this suffering her resistance to bitterness is remarkable. Devi reflects, "Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty first hand . . . she snarls and sulks . . . but she has no bitterness" (135-36).

Sita is younger than Mayamma but she also suffered for being a woman. Years have passed but the conditions of women remain unchanged. After marriage, her talent in playing the veena is discouraged totally. To prove her sincerity as a wife and daughter-in-law, she has to quit her childhood love for which, "She had poured all her energies into her hours of practice on the veena . . . she practised for at least five to six hours every day" (101). It is a fact that so many years may pass, but it is still on the part of a female that she has to pass through "Agni Pariksha" to prove her sincerity only for being a female. It was not her passion and love for veena playing only, which she has to give up, but she had to suppress her all desires, habits, love, likings and even food habits also. After her marriage Sita "missed rice: all her life, she had eaten three square meals of rice. Marriage had meant that Sita would have to learn to eat dry chapattis, which refuses to go down the throat like sticky, wet balls of mashed rice" (103).

Gita Hariharan brings out the fusing myth, tale and the real voices of different women, The Thousand Faces of Night brings alive the underworld of Indian Women's lives. The reality of female's fate has been expressed through the three female characters, Devi, Mayamma and

Sita. Though they belong to three different generations, the female fate remains as it is the same, no change at all,

All three belonged to different generations and well different in terms of education and social circumstances. Mayamma could not bear a child for several years, Sita had a girl child and Devi couldn't bear one. Mayamma's husband and mother-in-law tortured her physical, Sita troubles were more mental, and Devi's were due to her husband's indifferent attitude which disturbed her emotional equilibrium. (Tripathi 143)

Women are discarded, rejected and subordinated in a male-dominated society. A woman is forced to suppress her dreams and desires. In India women are brought up with the idea that they are only guests in their parental home and that their husband's house is their ultimate destination. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* give a realistic picture of the suffering endured by women in a male dominated society. They are not only suppressed by men but also by customs, traditions, rituals and religions. They are physically, emotionally and psychologically affected. They continue to live a hopeless life. Among such sufferers only a few voice out their protest.

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