

Women Characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract:

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a variety of female characters, mythological as well. The novel also exposes the real consequences whichever the women are facing in the male-dominated society. The characters in the novel wanted to be an ideal woman but the society around them is expecting to be mothers, wives and daughters-in-law. The complete novel is about the sufferings, alienation and humiliation of the female characters. To mix up the traditional structure, Githa has also brought the mythological ideas and also she tries to articulate the image of women, with the help of epics such as Ramayana and Mahabarata and Sanskrit stories. The stories of the characters-Devi, Sita, Mayamma has been narrated by linking them to mythological characters. The novel has a theme of grandmother's styled art of storytelling technique that is 'story within a story' technique.

The novel is woven around three generations of women- Devi, Sita, Mayamma. Despite the generations, background and education, Indian women is made to fall on the trap of the old customs and traditions. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, a young educated girl with an American experience married Mahesh because she does not want

to hurt her mother's feelings. At this time she also compares the relationship of her friends to their mothers.

The mothers and daughters had a conversation about their boyfriends, they quarreled and kissed. As the marriage happened under compulsion, Devi struggled a lot to cope up with her own husband who is busy with his office stuffs and tours most of the time. Her marital life led her to emotional breakdown which made her to get attached to Baba, when the relationship reminded of her own grandmother as her role was taken by him in her life. Baba's stories were related with reality.

Devi, the main protagonist of the novel, experiences "her home coming" she is sucked into "this fortress that shuts out the rest of the world, . . . a cocoon, a secure woman . . . and holds me fast to its thick sticky walls"(TFN 13). Devi, though from the third generation, connected to the second because of her mother Sita and to the first by her grandmother, as she was the one who told her the mythological stories and Mayamma. Devi recollects the story of Damayanti in Mahabarata. The swayamvara held where Damayanti was brave enough and determined to choose Nala. She throws the garland around his neck. Devi's grandmother ends the story with a moral "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning"(20). Through the story of Nala-Damayanti, Devi gets fascinated and gets a clear establishment of swayamvara. The stories are not easy for Devi to understand or digest.

Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of her husband or children and feel safer in this confined relationship. This confinement has made them slaves as they are dependant to them. The women characters in the novel are the victims under the patriarchal society. They have been trapped between traditions, old values, myths and modernity. According to Baba "The housewife should always be joyous adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does." (71). Women are suppressed in this patriarchal society. Parvatamma, Devi's mother-in-law, a woman of rare beauty, married at an early age "spend more and more time in puja room"(63) doing puja and singing bhajanais. But one day she leaves her husband's house

and never returned again. Baba says “She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a homecoming” (64).

The other character in the novel is Mayamma, the housekeeper of Devi’s in-laws, that is Mahesh’s family. She is portrayed as an ideal female character. She cannot find any alternative choice but has to accept her fate. The society turned out to be more cruel to a woman like Mayamma when she is abused by her own father-in-law and husband. Later her son turns against her and she has been deserted and moves to Parvatiamma’s house. Mayamma gets married with all blessings at the age of twelve. But day by day her mother-in-law’s torture gets increased as she becomes more concerned about her jewel.

As days passed by Mayamma is unable to get a baby. Her mother-in-law starts to complaint and asks her to undergo penance. As time passed, she is blessed with a son. Her husband runs away as he indulges himself more in drinking. He steals all the money and goes out of sight. Mayamma’s son who is her only hope behaved so rudely with her by asking money. But Mayamma takes care of him when he becomes ill with typhoid. He remains in a bad condition and later he dies. Mayamma has a soft feeling towards him, as it clearly shows the motherly love of women in common. Mayamma feels restless every time when her son is bed-ridden but later on she weeps from the core of her heart when he dies. She burns all the traces of her past along with the body of her son and left the village and comes to Mahesh’s house for shelter and becomes the housemaid and caretaker of their house. She narrates her story in pain and also she believes that her life is completely governed by gender. She is ill-treated by her husband. Finally she accepts her life and understands that women have to experience physical and mental pain because they are women.

Mayamma supports Devi as she does not want her life to be fated like her own. Not only she accepts her decision of walking away from Mahesh’s life but also wishes and blesses her. Devi stops following the old traditions that prevented a woman to achieve her rights of making choices resulted from the ill-treatment of her family. She tolerates everything. Mayamma, the uneducated female character gives comfort to Devi.

Sita, Devi's mother who sacrifices her happiness after her marriage brings up her daughter as a single mother. Basically the in-laws will expect the bride to adopt herself with the new environment. Her father-in-law roars like a lion towards her for playing veena without completing her household works. "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (30).

Sita hangs her body over the veena and then she pulls out the strings from the wooden base of the veena. She replies her father-in-law as, "Yes, I am a wife. A daughter-in-law" (30). She never touches her veena again. This is compared to the mythical character of Gandhari in Mahabharata who sacrificed herself and wore a black cloth with the intention of not seeing this world again as her husband was blind. She has come across a lot of struggles in her life. She decides to live her life after Devi's marriage but unfortunately her wishes have been destroyed when Devi walks away from Mahesh and returns to home.

Devi, finally returns to her mother to rediscover her true identity. Devi is depicted as an independent individual who does not fall prey to passive suffering. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* also discusses about what a woman is generally considered to be in India. It also portrays the condition of women caught between tradition and modernity.

This paper concludes with the fact that women are still ill-treated in this patriarchal society. They are forced to accept the concept of arranged marriage and later they themselves suffer both mental and physical pain because they are women. *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents a chain of events related to men and women, love and death and emotions as well as painful loneliness. Githa also intersperses with myth and folklores with the social status of women within the boundaries of time, space and region. The novel ends with Devi's quest for identity as she decides to start her own and happy life.

Work Cited

Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Penguin Books, 1992.