

**DEVI'S STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DISCOVERY IS A PIVOTAL EPISODE IN
THE NOVEL 'THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT'
BY GITA HARIHARAN**

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Abstract

Devi's struggle for self-discovery is a pivotal episode that decides her fate after her unsuccessful marriage, to join her mother in times of distress for solace communicates her trust in her mother's potential to nurture her back to life skills. This reinforces confidence in her essential self for her survival henceforth not to look back but to move on in life without regrets. Although Devi was traditionally brought up but her mother Sita was progressive and encouraged her to have her best education in America. Devi's self was confused as she lived and influenced by both the countries India and America; they are equally rich in their cultural background but the dissimilarity in approaching life that made all the difference in her mindset. Githa Hariharan's narrated Devi's inner struggle for self in *The Thousand Faces of Night*: I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads. (41)

Introduction

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (winner of the 1993 Commonwealth Writer's prize), portrayed women's inner conflict and their courageous confrontation against external hardships that redefined their destiny. The author describes Devi's struggle for self in the novel as the beginning and end of misfortunes in her life. Devi was strongly influenced by her grandmother's mythological stories of inspiring Indian women in her formative stages and was fascinated to be one among them. One of the interesting findings is that all the female characters are named after Goddess name in the novel, Devi, Sita, Parvathi, Lalitha, Mayamma, Tara etc. and these are known names in Indian mythology. Devi's childhood was mostly occupied in listening stories of powerful but poignant women who stand as epitome

of grace in Indian society. In her childhood she never understood the great sacrifices of these powerful women and their greatness to uphold the honor of the virtuous deeds. Initially, she could not comprehend the overall sense of the stories told by her grandmother but later in her growing years she completely grasped the intention of narrating those stories to her. Grandmother's stories are based on Indian mythology and she narrated stories of Damyanti, Gandhari, and Amba from Mahabharata epic to derive inspiration to live with dignity and integrity in order to live a worthy life.

Dichotomy of Indo-Western cultural influences had confused Devi's self. She spent her childhood in India and later went America for higher studies. In America she adapted the lifestyle of that country to live a comfortable life but always adhered to her family values to live a dignified life in a foreign land. She rejected her friend Dan's request to stay back in America and decided to return to India to support her widowed mother. Americans believe in individuality and Indians give preference to society over individuality. She lost her distinctiveness in the cultural differences that trapped her consciousness in the novel and this dichotomy confused her essence as an individual became victim of her own decisions. In India she was affectionately surrounded by her relatives and felt a sense of belongingness strongly embedding family values. She lost her father and her mother wanted her to get married and settled in her life. It was hard for her to deny marriage proposals, agreed for marriage and married Mahesh; from here on her search for self, ended with alienation within self.

Devi fondly gazes back in the past. Her grandmother was strong, kind-hearted, caring, and considerate women that reflected in her day to day connections with the people. She told bed time stories with a purpose in the novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (TTFN):

'Listen, my child,' she would begin, her hand unraveling the stray knots in my wet hair, 'listen to these stories of men and women who loved, shed blood, and met their deaths as ardently they lived.' (Hariharan 27)

Damayanti story was narrated with an intention to inspire to live like a princess and ironically her marriage to Mahesh was far away from such fanciful swayamvara told by her grandmother. Gandhari's great sacrifice of relinquishing her vision to embrace her destiny- a blind husband fills the heart with reverence for womanhood. Devi heard these stories from her grandmother, who wants her granddaughter to face the challenges of fate like that of Gandhari's pride and fury. Grandmother was enraged on Gauri (her servant) who lived an immoral life by falling in love with her brother-in-law, defamed her family name thus deserved to be despised. Grandmother narrated a story to Devi about a young girl who married disguised snake and discarded all comments on her marriage that raised curious questions on "Will this pearl-like maiden marry that venom-tongued snake? She answered virtuously "A girl is given only once in marriage...Let me go to my waiting husband."(Hariharan 33) Grandmother told this story again with a purpose, not to follow the example of Gauri but to be inspired by this noble story of a young girl who married to a snake later her commitment to him freed him from his curse and turned him as a young man.

Another story was of Amba, a princess, one of the women characters in Mahabharata who along with her sisters was heroically carried away in a chariot by Bheeshma in order to get them married to his younger step brother. Later she confessed that she loves Salwa but when she went back to him, he refused to honor her. Dejected Amba approached Bheeshma with a marriage proposal but stating his self-vow he declined the offer. Considering Bheeshma to be responsible for her disgrace took a powerful pledge that she should become the cause of his death and to fulfil her oath she had shed her womanhood. She lived several lifetimes to gain

superhuman energy piled through her dreams of revenge and later born as a daughter rose as a son. Grandmother depicted Amba's agony 'Lost in her insatiable desire for revenge, Amba spent long years in the forest, with her hatred as a faithful companion. (Hariharan 38)

Amba's life was an example that strength lies in courage and determination to seize sorrow and uncertainty to arise and fight for the cause by denying to be victimized. Uma was Devi's cousin who after the marriage became victim of domestic violence and her grandmother told the story of Amba to draw the similarity that both were the victim of disaster but how they react to such catastrophe speaks more about their mental strength. Her grandmother appreciated how Amba transformed her hatred into a triumph by fulfilling her oath to become instrumental to slain Bheeshma in the great war- Mahabharata. To honor her word was the source of her strength. Devi's grandmother greatly admires honorable qualities in women. She consciously picked up such characters from Indian mythology which suits her purposeful preaching's to strengthen her granddaughter's self with virtuous deeds to live a worthy life. Devi's marriage was a learning experience that provided her all the opportunities to exhibit all her virtues that she imbibed from the stories but in the process she lost her sense of self and was confused in her life decisions.

A potential question, What she wants from her life? : With the changing world her fascination to be one among the great mythological women faded. She realized the fact that to practically follow the values displayed by virtuous women requires extraordinary patience and courage which probably possible in unusual circumstances.

A journey for self -discovery began when she saw the circumstances were overpowering and controlling her destiny to an extent that she completely forgotten what she wants in her life. She married Mahesh and wholly devoted herself to the marriage. Before her marriage she heard stories from her grandmother and after her marriage her father-in-law Baba, told her many stories again with a purpose. His stories were centered on how a devoted and sacrificial wife reaches to heaven after her death. Devi's mother-in-law parvathamma left her home forever in search of a god. Ashok was Mahesh's colleague and Tara was Ashok's wife who was always busy with her work. Mahesh always admired Tara's quality of being self-engaged and persuaded Devi to take inspiration from her life.

Devi with the passage of time was getting more and more disillusioned with her marriage, her husband was very clear about his work and had certain conventional image for his wife. He was from an orthodox family and was brought up with a tradition bond belief for man-woman roles and duties in the society. The popular conviction was 'A man bread earner and a women caretaker of the family'. Devi was emotionally depended on her father-in-law and soon he received a letter from her daughter Lalitha asking him to join her, as the baby's delivery due in another month. Her father-in-law went to America to stay with his daughter and after some days news of his demise sealed her hope of his coming back to India. Mahesh tours gets longer, she gets disheartened and gradually she started feeling, it's a loveless marriage.

Why the self gets confused? Un-acceptance of the situations and chasing what you want ethical or unethical decide your choices and your choices determines the self. Aristotle said: 'knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom' hence the basis of strong self is self -awareness. Devi was an educated woman, enforced to be housewife and dissatisfied in her marriage that led her to take irrevocable decisions that changed her destiny from fortune to misfortune. Certainly her life needs purpose to live and the search for that purpose disturbed her life. May be her life would have been different if she was surrounded and guided by her elders in her course of life. Devi's Grandmother, mother, and father-in-law through their conversation

communicated that marriage seeks faith, commitment, dedication and if required sacrifice of one's interest for healthy relationships. Devi sums up the motives behind her grandmother and Baba's stories in the novel:

Baba's stories remind me of my grandmother's, but they are also different....Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His defines limit. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. They make one point in concise terms: that the saints lived according to the laws of time- tested tradition. (Hariharan 51)

Devi's self-discovery and her self- realization narrate a saga of a common woman. Devi's aimlessness deprived her to live an honorable life and constantly distancing her from her family values paving a way for her to live frustrated life. Mahesh wanted to be a father and Devi needs medical assistance to become a mother. She wanted to avoid the painful procedure so she suggested for adoption but Mahesh was against the idea. Devi was gradually getting attracted towards Gopal her neighbor who was a musician and she found her purpose of living in him. She decides, "Yes, I must decide, take the reins of my life in my own faltering hands." (Hariharan 89) Bitterness for Mahesh's fatherhood caused her to love Gopal and she decided to end her suffocating marriage by going away with Gopal. Devi felt his music was a solace to her miserable life. Circumstances are always powerful in deciding the fate of the individuals. Initially what attracts will finally repels, Gopal's music brought Devi nearer to him but the same music took her far away from him. "She knew the man now, but still did not understand his music".(Hariharan 127) She thought she would be happy outside the marriage but being with Gopal she understood what she lost and decided to leave Gopal to be resettled with her mother that was the beginning of her self-discovery.

Devi knew the time was right; if she did not act now, she would be forever condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidarity of the mainland. ((Hariharan138)

Her mother Sita revived her passion in playing Veena welcomed distressed Devi by banning her mind from trading in memories, confessions, judgments, by accepting the present as it is without ifs and buts apprehensions.

Conclusion

Self-discovery is the act or process of gaining knowledge or understanding of your personality, abilities, and feelings. She understood her core values, her strengths, her passions, and her natural tendencies when she viewed her life on her terms and evolved as a strong person to face her destiny. A mother always provides unconditional love, a hope for better life and Devi reaches that safe place for a good beginning. The novel ends with her self-discovery and symbolic reunion with her mother. Sometimes when you lose your way, you find yourself!

Works Cited

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