

ECO-FEMININE BONDING IN GITA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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Since the age of Enlightenment and Colonization of the world, the division between nature and culture, women were put on the side of nature whereas men were seen as representatives of culture. The constitution of woman as the second sex leads to the displacement and extinction of diversity in the biological world. The patriarchal world sees man as the measure of all values, with no space for diversity but for hierarchy. Women, being unequal and inferior, struggle for survival and for environmental security. From women's perspective sustainability without environment justice is impossible and environment justice is impossible without justice between sexes. Environment is not simply an outward entity but an integral part of feminine sensibility.

The 1990s explores the thematic boldness and technical innovations of Indian novelists against the backdrop of the Indian culture and heritage. The spread of technical education and management studies and easy access to information through cell phones and internet reshape the new cultural identity of India rising up a number of new possibilities and probabilities to meet new-challenges. In the pivotal aspect of the techno-thematic network of the Indian English fiction, the women novelists- Shobhaa De, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Gita Hariharan and Kiran Desai- portray 'educated' women characters in their fiction dealing with the issue of marriage and the identity of a new woman in the old society practising quaint orders and methods. The women protagonists grow up with relationships with the natural world including the life of the mind and the life of the earth. In an age of environmental destruction, women, as the weaker creatures of the earth, seek their solace, strength and spirit from the entire ecosphere.

Gita Hariharan is the internationally acclaimed Indo-English writer, born in Coimbatore, grown up in Bombay, educated in the United States and settled in New Delhi as the freelance. Her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, deals with Devi who returns to Madras after obtaining a degree from the USA, falling a prey to the chaffing pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order. Her love for Dan, her boy friend in America was only a 'brief dream' because it is impossible to conceive a life with him. "The possibility of imposing a permanent such as marriage- however flexible in transient America- was somehow obscene" (*Thousand Faces* 6)

On her return to Madras, Devi feels that she is held fast in the thick, sticky walls of 'secure womb' (13) of her mother Sita. Mother's womb has been called the child's environment. Sita nurtures the dream of a happy conventional marriage for her daughter the modern

swayamvara. The bride has to be 'fair' 'beautiful' 'home-loving' and 'prepared to adjust'(17) in marriage which is supposed to give her warmth and comfort in human relationships. This made Devi recollect the stories of her grandmother and her vocation which had the same quality of warm reassurance. For Devi, six-year-old girl, her home, a small dilapidated house in the agraharam and her grandmother's lap and her mythical stories prepared her mind for the 'dignity' and solemnity of a swayamvara. The nostalgia for childhood and the search for motherliness in the country side during vocation in the experience of 'rootlessness', part of reaching out towards nature, an experience of the need for living interconnectedness.

In the Indian value- based system, early childhood with the grandparents is of paramount importance. Through the story of oral tradition, the girl child learns about her inborn qualities like sympathy, kindness, sacrifice, patience and self-discipline. Each story told by grandmother concerns an emotional and intellectual development of Devi. Her mythical stories are centered round marriage- the Nala-Damayanthi swayamvara, the 'self -choice' ceremony that will allow the bride to choose her husband, the story of Gandhari married to a blind rich prince with self-sacrifice, the story of the beautiful girl who married a snake who turned out to be handsome youngman in the bridal bed; the disappointed mind of Amla in marriage due to the kidnap of Bheeshma; the motherhood of Ganga and Shantanu. These stories deconstruct the representation of the ideal woman with delicate feminine sensibility. These stories of womanhood indelibly imprint themselves in Devi's mind, "I lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine...I rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons heads"(41).

The dignity and destiny of a woman is seen in marriage. Whether educated or uneducated, she has to suppress her dislike and pretend not to disobey her parents. Devi marries Mahesh, 'a diligent and serious minded business executive' (77), a regional manager in a multi national company that makes detergents and toothpastes. Mahesh is most of the time away on tours with no time to spend with his wife. "A marriage must grow gradually like a delicate but promising sapling" (49). Devi, in her new home on Jacaranda Road surrounded with the lush Jacaranda trees in the garden, can barely suppress her increasing longing for companionship. She passively listens to Baba's stories which remind her of her grandmother's stories. Her stories were a 'prelude to her womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities' (51). But Baba's stories are functional, having for their centre point ' an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife'(51).

Failure to find joy and happiness in marriage reduces the woman to loneliness and existential angst. Traditions colour and contour Indian womanhood and its power on the collective Indian psyche demands confirmity to the feminine mystic syndrome. In the Indian social structure, the legacy of cultural codes depicts women as a symbol of reverence, a 'devi'. But Devi is inferiorized and pludgeoned to play male- scripted subordinate role. Devi has some expectations from her husband to support and understand her on emotional grounds but her expectations are not realized. She is happy that Mahesh is not a present or impotent but she is inexpert to 'adjust' to the new environment. She is interested in learning Sanskrit from Baba and she desires to apply for the position of research assistant. As there is not much to do at home, she would like to overcome her boredom. But Mahesh questions her capacity and sees her only a homemaker, a mother. He wants Devi to have his baby, to have control over her body and emphasizes the role of a mother. All through the ages, women have sought the deep content that comes with motherhood.

In myths, motherhood is sacred and Devi affirms that motherhood will soothe the

knotted, disconnected raga in her mind.

What is heaven than the earth?

A mother

What is higher than heaven?

A father

Who is the friend given by the Gods?

It is the wife who is that friend and safe refuge,

answered Yudhishtira. (86)

A cradle by her bed will hold Devi to reality. But having a baby is not like buying or selling product. When Devi undergoes clinical tests fertility, she realizes her conscious possession of her body and its needs. She is the owner, the mistress of herself, she has to rise from the position of object to that of the intelligent individual. Susan Zimmermann in her dissertation on 'Sexual Reform' says " The idea of such a right to self- determination over the body, a body which was analytically, clearly seen as separated and apart from consciousness, has its roots, quite obviously, in the freedom of the individual from personal dependency and direct personal subjection. (qtd in *Ecofeminism* 11)

Devi is attracted towards Gopal who is her neighbour and his music vibrates independent thoughts in Devi. Devi thought

My grandmother fed me fantasies; my father, a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope....I have mimed the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose strings they pulled and jerked with their love. I have made very few choices....I have stumbled on-stage alone, greedy for a story of my own. (136-137)

She makes her choice to go with Gopal thinking her life will be better than that with Mahesh. But soon she realizes that Gopal too is self-centred and makes the decision of returning to her mother to start life anew 'not a defeated or dejected loner but a fugitive sure of her survival, determined to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, to start from the beginning(139).

Perfect symbiosis of man and nature is possible only through the feeling of love. The growing discontent, persistent insecurity and faithlessness are the natural consequences of the ravishing scenario of nature. Besides mental imbalance, Devi experiences loneliness that made her elope with Gopal but she felt an ignorant child imprisoned in a woman's body displaying her rebellious, independent spirit. The mind or the deepest thought of Indian women is generally influenced by violent powers that control unfairly her acceptance and admittance of defeat. Women, even, in the changed context are yoked with the traditional image of ideal womanhood and they are unable to express their anger towards those who are responsible for injuring their 'pride and dignity'. Devi was blind folded into marriage like Gandhari but defiant in protest like Amba. Within the social structure of the male oriented society, Devi could not define her identity, ie, as wife under an arranged marriage with Mahesh or even as a rebellious lover with Gopal. The restrictions of the society do not allow her to bring out her womanliness. So she decides to go back to her mother Sita, who was 'hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house' (139).

References

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