

SOCIAL REALISM IN *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) revolves around women's predicament in contemporary India. Along with the long history of women's subjugation is shown an alternative analysis of myths that have been having a considerable impact on Indian psyche. The protagonist gradually becomes aware of their suppressive nature and discards them. The discussion of myths in the novel is so much substantial that S Ramanathan considers the novel as the "commemoration of Indian mythology". He says that while contemporary women writers talk about the contemporary women's problems in love, sex and marriage with greater confidence; Githa Hariharan articulates these themes with the help of Indian Mythology. Kader Aki also considers that in the novel myths are revisited, rewrote, and retold from a female point of view in order to focus the inner lives and spaces of women. Likewise, while for C Vijayasree, Hariharan uses the myths in process of net-working women of different ages and generations (177); for Urmila Verma, the novel demonstrates how the religious sayings, anecdotes, words of wisdom uttered by old people, expressed through various rituals, religious rites and customs, emphasize the acceptance of woman's traditional role (101).

The novel reserves the entire space to discuss exclusively the issues related to women. Discussing the theme of the novel Bindu Jacob writes: "[The novel] can be aptly defined as the several faces of thought presented by Githa Hariharan about the central theme – the struggle and predicaments of women in Indian society. The central theme is categorized as the quest for identity, penance, female bonding, marriage, chaos and dilemma by the rebellious protagonist Devi" (81). Similarly, J Yellaiah and G Pratima hold:

[The novelist] sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. [The novelist] diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find, through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality . . . this dichotomy is approached by women exercising their choice adhering to the construct with unflinching loyalty in earlier times and daring to cross the barrier in the changed context. (188)

But, the novel is different from other Indian English fictions in its treatment of the subject matter. While other Indian English novels delineate women's misery in a traditional ways, novel also deals with the women who are not apparently physically tortured but bear deep pangs on their psychology. The novel aims to present the inner lives of women and tries to dissect the confined social structure which does not accept women's role apart from the traditional role. It subjects women of three successive generations to show that the legacy of suffering is all alike. They may hold different-different social position, but within the walls of the house, they have the same situation. Every next generation is considered more advanced than the previous generation, but every generation is destined to be the victim of sick social structure which works against

weaker sections of the society. Showing her disappointment on this sordid fact Tripti Garg says: “[T]he novel causes the reader’s encounter with the truth that how so ever the female get educational capacities, how so ever the society may become modernized; but the females will be exploited in all the ages and their condition will remain as stagnant as it was years ago during the mythical age” (61).

The novel opens with the last few days of Devi in America. She is coming back to India after completing her post-graduation from there. She feels excited and nostalgic for her native place, Chennai (Madras). She recollects her childhood days. In every summer vacation, she visited her village house with her parents where her grandmother lived alone. Devi’s wizened old grandmother acquainted her with many beliefs and rituals. This was the first place where she started seeing the role, importance, and influence of rituals. The influence of village experience did not end with her return; instead, it was with her during her stay abroad. Under the influence of her childhood mythological stories she has developed an aspiration to be like the women of the stories, because of which she remained an “unmixable mix” there.

Devi’s actual trial begins with her arrival at Madras. Aspiring for her daughter a bright future, Sita, Devi’s mother, arranges a moder *swayamvara* (a ceremony to select a bridegroom), like her grandmother’s childhood stories. In relation to her situation she recalls a story. Grandmother told her that in ancient age, brides had the liberty to choose bridegrooms of their choice. For this purpose, marriageable kings and princes from all different parts of the country were invited on a single day. Devi further mentions:

In my grandmother’s stories, there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending. No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own homemade yardsticks for life. (Hariharan 20)

Her first story was of princess Damyanti who got her heart’s desire despite all the efforts made by gods to make her selects any one of them instead of King Nala. Another was of Gandhari, who met her fate alone and accepted a blind husband. In addition to it was of Amba, who was kidnapped by Bheeshma from her *swayamvara*,. Later, she took revenge on Bheeshma by becoming the cause of his death. The consequence of the stories was so great that, Devi created her fantasy world where she imagined herself as “an incarnation of Durga, walking the earth to purge it of fat jowled slimy-tailed greed” (43). Nilufer E Bharucha finds it as “a feminist fantasy of decimating exploitative men – an Amazonian desire to inhabit autonomous spaces outside male-ordained enclosures” (102).

Initially these stories were only source of interest for Devi. But gradually she got aware of a pattern and similarity amid the tales and the story of real character around her. She realized that the anecdotes were not simple; instead, they were charged with lessons for her. She says that her “grandmother’s stories were no ordinary bed-time stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral to be drawn out. Ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors” (27). The grandmother always extorted either a comparison or a contrast between stories of tales and real characters. She always had a parallel from both worlds. Perhaps

through this correspondence she wanted to express that human civilization might be moving forward but women's condition and expectations from them have not been changed.

One day while playing in the house Devi found her mother's photograph holding a *veena* in her hands. The grandmother told Devi that Sita was a very good *veena* player and she also told the reason why Sita stopped playing it. But before telling the reason she told her the story of Gandhari from the great epic the *Mahabharata*. After finding the lie about the blindness of her husband in her fury she made a vow and tore off a piece of cloth and tied it over her eyes for the whole life. The grandmother summed up this end as appropriate for Gandhari's majestic blood. In her appraisal "Gandhari was not just another wilful, proud woman, she embraced her destiny a blind husband with a self sacrifice worthy of her royal blood" (Hariharan 29). The grandmother makes comparison between Gandhari and Sita as both became dutiful wives. After getting married to Mahadevan, her father, she made proud her husband's house too. But one day seeing *pooja* room in a mess her father-in-law got furious and ordered her to stop the practice. She pulled stings out of the wooden base. It was her way of protest. In order to prove that she was a dutiful wife, she stopped playing *veena*. Devi realised that "Gandhari's pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering, was no piece of fiction. Gandhari's anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a lifelong blindfold" (29). Gandhari rebelled, but silently. Similarly, Sita made her fury her life force. She abandoned the playing *veena* and never touched it again and became an obedient daughter-in-law the neighbours praised.

Both the cases present a deep rooted and all pervasive social reality of India; i.e. a loyal wife and daughter-in-law is only one who sacrifices her passion and puts her domestic duties on priority. Sita became what others expected her to be, even at the cost of her own passion and individuality. Observing her predicament K Damodar Rao writes:

[I]n a dominant patriarchal society like India, it is not uncommon to see women, pitted against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against themselves resulting in self-inflicted wounds and penance. This in itself is a resultant factor of the realization of the impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliations on them. This 'hostility against oneself' is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the *Mahabharata*. (160)

Another story the grandmother picked to display the pathetic resemblance between legendary and mundane women characters is of Amba. Amba was kidnapped from her *swayamvara* by Bheeshma, a celibate. After being kidnapped by him, she could not dare to go to her father's as, "a woman without a husband has no home." When she realized that she could get help from no one, she decided to take revenge from her kidnapper because it was he who ruined her life. In order to take vengeance Amba practiced meticulous penance, took many births and finally became the cause of his death. Grandmother drew a resemblance between Amba and Uma, who was a motherless girl. She got married to a man but unfortunate Uma could not enjoy her fate very long and returned to her home after a year as both her husband and father-in-law were drunkard. Her experience in new home was worse than she had in her home. But the most apprehensive thing which happened to her that led her to leave the place was her father-in-law's lecherous behaviour. Uma returned and lived with grandmother till the old woman died.

Through both the stories it can be easily drawn that, regardless of their status in the society, women have been the worst sufferer throughout the ages. Both the characters, despite

the fact that they hailed from different ages and different strata of society, corresponded to the plight of women. Male hypocrisy and patriarchy played a significant role in their painful lives. Presenting a typical example of male dominance Bheeshma, a self-proclaimed celibate, kidnapped the princesses for his stepbrother. He did it with the intention that the girls would bore the royal house the strong warrior-sons. But both the King Salwa and Bheesma refused to accept her. Though, both of them boast for their strength and righteousness, their hypocrisy is very much apparent. If, on the one hand, Bheesma devastated her life but could not set it right; on the other, King Salwa, who did not protect her at the time of her abduction, rejected her on her return boasting that a king did not accept a woman won by someone else (Hariharan 37). Thus, both the cases clearly reflect how the women, in every age and in each section of the society, have been suffering by male hypocrisy.

The protagonist observes that the lesser lives around her did not always rise to the heroic proportion of the old woman's version of Gandhari's sacrifice. In this group was Gauri, the maidservant, who got married to a man and fell in love with her brother-in-law. Her act infuriated everyone. The reason of the people's fury was that Gauri should be happy with her husband no matter how he treats her. To their consideration she broke social norms by showing dislike for her husband and fleeing with her brother-in-law. In the answer to Gauri's story grandmother narrated a tale in which a woman gave birth to a snake. One day the mother suggested her husband to get her son married. Eventually he succeeded in finding a beautiful wife for his son. While the people sympathized with the bride's fortune, she refused their consideration: "a girl is given only once in marriage." She entered into her husband's home and after some time she got amazed with the miracle that her snake husband turned into a handsome man. People held that with her devotion she has changed her husband's fate. The story has a very clear-cut message that like the bride Gauri too should have accepted her fate and with her devotion changed her husband's nature. These cases also show the society's expectation from women that they should be docile and should unquestionably accept whatever is given to them by the society.

After listening all these stories, Devi got a habit to imagine herself as a heroine, an amalgam of all heroines of the tales. With all this, she expected to encounter them in her future life or perform like them. Along with the mythical characters, her mother Sita also has left a deep impression on her mind. The novel informs that she has always been different, and her talent and her unfeminine determination have set her apart from the other female characters in the novel. She wants everything to be perfect, disciplined and meticulously done or whatever way she wishes things to be. Good housekeeping, good taste, and hard work are told to be her guiding mottos (Hariharan 101). The setting of the garden suggests that she does not allow any kind of rebellion against her be it of plants or of people. She handles everything with the same whip. Devi, her daughter, also is tamed by her. Sita draws an analogy between both Devi and a clinging creeper: "both are young and tender and eager to be led in the right direction." Both, the garden and her daughter, are what she wants them to be. After the completion of Devi's education she arranges for her marriage and selects Mahesh, a manager in a company, for her daughter. She takes it as a sort of mission and assumes that her daughter is not mature enough to take the decisions regarding her own life because she is young.

After getting married to Mahesh she lives with him. In her new house, she finds two new storytellers – her caretaker Mayamma and her father-in-law, a retired professor of Sanskrit. While the former tells her experiences, the latter offers myths. Mayamma is, as both Yellaiah and

Pratima say, a typical Indian female who accepts her fate, curses it but never questions it and lives her life exactly as is expected of her. She bears the brunt of cruelty that society ordains for a woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and a mother (192). Her life has many shades that a woman can ever imagine to experience in her life. She tells that she got married when she was still a child. Her husband was a man of bestial instincts, and her mother-in-law was a peevish woman who kept on shouting on her.

Mayamma presents miserable life of a woman who was married early. While in the early years of her marriage the reason of her suffering was her inexperience, in the later years her sterility became the cause of her plight. In order to mend her fate she was asked to do penance. For ten years, she did a long and tedious atonement to get a child. Finally she gave birth to a debauch child who too tormented her. Her husband ran away and took away with him all the money in the house. Moreover, her mother-in-law died “whimpering about the curse Mayamma had brought upon her household” (Hariharan 81). Bindu Jacob comments that Mayamma belongs to the generation of women who quietly bore to death their liabilities and never rebelled even if they wanted to, because it was considered outrageous for a woman to shirk away her familial bindings even if she was crushed underneath it (81). S Indira opines that women like Mayamma continue to sacrifice and live a tortured, humiliating life because they have no option, no way out (68). But, anyhow, her plight reflects one more facet of brutal social reality of India; i.e. child marries and the tortures that women bear if they fail to produce a male child for the family.

Devi’s father-in-law’s stories remind her childhood with her grandmother. But she observes a variation. While grandmother’s stories seem a prelude to Devi’s womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities; Baba’s stories seem to define the limits of a wife. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. His stories have an undercurrent demand that in order to gain saint like respected position, a woman must live life according to the terms and conditions dictated from time to time by the society. According to Baba’s opinion a housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic wares, restrained in expenses, as well as controlled in mind, word, and body (Hariharan 70). Getting bored of her loneliness she becomes introvert and re-thinks over her situation:

So this is all there is to be it. The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, and I see now that I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor. I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, the passion of the sacrifice whole, all encompassing.

Instead the knife draws a drop at a time. The games it plays with me are ignominious. It pricks my chin; and when my hand flies up to soothe the sore spot, it stings my elbow. The heart I prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (Hariharan 54)

She admits: “my education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood” (Hariharan 54). She describes her state as: “The long afternoon stretches before me like an endless, pointless road. My ache with restlessness, my tongue is parched with lack of use. The old man is garrulous enough if I seek him out, droning half-stories about a part that oppresses me like a life I want to forget” (Hariharan 79).

After a long debate with herself she decides, in order to get rid of her loneliness, to join a job. But her plan is discarded by her husband. Instead, he suggests Devi to stay at home to help old Mayamma in daily household works. Like Baba Mahesh too believes that a woman gets respect only if she is devoted to her husband and family. Regarding his behaviour Monika Gupta considers that he is chauvinist and hardly bothers about his wife's emotional needs (93). He is totally inadequate as a husband. He simply cannot and does not wish to understand Devi's deepest longings, fears, and needs. Devi tells: "He snarls instead about women's neuroses and my faulty upbringing. Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An animal fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the *thali* around 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 among their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight?" (Hariharan 74).

But his typical chauvinist nature becomes more apparent when he proposes her to have a baby. He makes this proposal in order to pacify and make her busy. For the purpose, Devi gets ready to meet the doctor, to officially discuss her personal life. She realizes that only a few years ago, she would have burst into laughter, "but [she] seems to have lost, along with many other things, [her] sense of humour, even [her] girlish ability to giggle. [She is] someone else now" (Hariharan 91). Regarding this change in her behaviour Jasbir Jain observes that marriage is at the centre of women suffering because it contains within it the power to destroy and in the novel the confining limits of the relationship stifles the protagonist (125). On her situation A G Khan also holds that the marriage brings an unfortunate predicament which all women must suffer. An America returned Devi suffers the same humiliation that Mayamma an illiterate, ignorant village woman did a few decades ago. The only change is that modern women are humiliated through modern technology – "smear", "injection" and "fertility centre" (138). By tradition, motherhood is considered essential for an Indian woman. Otherwise, she loses her right to rule the home. Stating the significance of being a mother in Indian society Sudhir Kakar, with his tongue-in-cheek, says, "an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is son, is both a certification and a redemption" (qtd. in Rao 167). Since the protagonist is unable to conceive a baby, she loses her hold on the family too.

After making a comparison between her past and present, it becomes difficult for her to stay at ease with unfulfilled past and unsatisfying present. She becomes restless to embrace some change in her life. Nothing around her seems her capable to soothe her. Sympathizing with her condition Bindu Jacob writes: "Mahesh [has] everything a lady could hope for, but his cold and indifferent attitude [is] more than she could suffer. She feels cheated like Gandhari and slighted like Amba. Her penance takes multiple forms of response from self pity to revenge and from self-inflection to a strong sense of injustice" (83). At this juncture she meets her neighbour Gopal, a singer and falls in love with him. Unlike Mahesh, this man is very caring for her and by his acts makes her feel that she is very special for him. He senses things related to her before it takes place and misses nothing. She feels overwhelmed by her new experience of life. She goes in live-in relation with Gopal, becomes part of his staff, and accompanies him in his musical tours. For some days, her new experience gives her pleasure. But after sometime she realizes that both belong to two different worlds: he from the light and she from the darkness; he from popular world, she from unpopular world. She feels uneasy about her relationship with him.

Because her own experience is splintered and light weight, she realizes that Gopal's music is no longer romantic and magnetic distant call to her.

Devi represents another harsh social reality of contemporary society – a married woman's plight who is not happy with her husband and decides to live with her lover. But, since it is unacceptable in a traditional society, she becomes an open subject to everybody's comment and leering. Ultimately she decides to change her life and to have her own story – a different story which has been told till now neither by grandmother nor by Baba. She gets fascinated by her mother-in-law Parvatamma's story who was more ambitious. She had, like a man in a self-absorbed search for a god, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder. (Hariharan 64). Like Parvatamma, she decides to turn things upside down by doing what she has not been told and planned by others to do. Instead, she takes up to write a new story. She tells till now her "grandandmother fed me fantasies, my father a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope, and when disappointed, pushed me forward in the direction she chose. You could say I have been lucky, I have been well looked after. I have mimed the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose strings they pulled and jerked with their love" (Hariharan 135-37).

Being fed up of others expectations and all pervasive male hypocrisy, she decides to leave Gopal's house in search of her identity. She returns to her mother "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all" (Hariharan 139). Thus, it is apparent that the novel deals with almost every aspect of women's life and their plight, a sordid social reality of contemporary Indian society. It shows that an all pervasive chauvinism has been controlling Indian social life from time immemorial. A G Khan rightly considers the novel as a Mahabharata of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humility, arrogance and submission. The novelist exploits the rich reservoir of Indian collective consciousness by peeping into the psyche of mythical characters – specially the women victims. She tries to draw an analogy between contemporary and mythical figures. She further states that this Mahabharata is narrated from the feminine perspective telling not of Karna, Arjun or Bhima but of Gandhari and Amba. In the contemporary world there are only two clear cut slots women can fit in – one leads to *sanyaas* in a spirit of resignation and fatalism; the other a full-time housewife. Mayamma and Parvatamma chose the first: Sita opted for the second – "blameless wife". But Devi finds herself "in between, around, on the edges of all circles" (135-45). While Khan clusters them in three groups, Makarand Paranjape does not find any difference in their conditions: "All these women have trouble adjusting to a constricting and dehumanizing environment into which they find themselves trapped. They are unstable people, unable to cope and survive in world which seems to deface their identities. They are slowly, but inexorable driven to the brink of extreme mental distress or suicide" (19).

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