

**SUFFERING AND HOPE: GITHA HARIHARAN'S FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *THE THOUSAND
FACES OF NIGHT***

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Elisabeth Kubler-Ross would say, “The most beautiful people who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss have found their way out of those depths”. The saga of suffering of women chiefly originates from the traditional society. Women have been a creature trampled through the centuries, living a silently suffering, sacrificing shadowy, supine, existence, just bearing and rearing children, cooking and tending the house. She has no existence other than a suffering, pathetic creature and is even glorified in the suffering inflicted upon her by the wanton male. She has been mercilessly denied opportunities for open expression of the true feelings in the tradition bound society. The role constructs and behavioural norms have been very restrictive and oppressive for women to assert their individuality. The present paper concentrates on the sufferings and protest of mythical as well as fictional characters of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The mythical characters Gandhari, the Snake woman and Amba suffer in the traditional role. Hariharan portrays through fictional characters Mayamma, Sita, Parvatiamma and Devi that this kind of suffering is no exceptional even in the modern age. It also focuses on the sense of revolt through the ages. Women have been suffering right from the earliest times to the present. Only the degree of suffering has varied from time to time. Hariharan diligently captures the sufferings of present day women like and their struggle for individuality. Even the changes in educational, social, political and economic status of women do not all of a sudden erase some of the cultural codification.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan portrays clearly how the woman characters protest against the traditional role prescribed for her. She does not want her characters suffer the clutches of the tradition bound society. She makes them protest with a determination. They carve a niche for themselves after the hardships of life. The present study concentrates on the tension experienced by the women in a tradition bound society and their sufferings all through the ages. The mythical characters Gandhari, the Snake woman and Amba have been victims in their traditional roles. They protest against injustice and assert themselves in their own way. It happens to be the same with the fictional characters of Hariharan. Mayamma, Sita, Parvatiamma and Devi suffer the restrictions of tradition. However they do not transcend the role allotted to them. They undergo the arduous journey to retain their individuality after great struggle.

Devi, the protagonist has been fed with mystical stories during her childhood. The experience Devi come across and hears provide a framework of penance, protest and suffering inflicted by a male-dominated society. The mythical stories have occupied so much a part of her

life that Devi considers herself the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. She believes that divine anger help her heroic break through. Her fantasy of a goddess makes possible the riding of the magical demons and evils. Thus she acquires the role of a protestor from the stories she hears from her grandmother.

The mythical character Gandhari has been married to the Prince Dhritarashtra. Gandhari is shocked to find her husband blind. She in a fit of fury tears off a piece of cloth and blindfolds herself for the rest of her life. She has protested against the injustice inflicted upon her with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. The terrible self-punishment has not only fuelled her anger but also kept her never extinguishable wrath and ever-present reproach to those who have wronged her.

The mythical story of Gandhari bears a profound impact on the mind of Devi. The fury of Gandhari sneaks into the heart of Devi. A woman has to meet her fate alone. She broods:

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 life-long blind fold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine. (29)

The suffering of the mythical snake woman is quite different. She comes to know that she has been married to a serpent. She is not able to even lament or wail over her pitiable situation instead, she says: "A girl is given only once in marriage so stop this mockery of lamenting and wailing. Let me go to my waiting husband" (33). She has to take the role of an obedient wife taking care of the needs of her husband. She looks after him without a whimper or murmur. "Will this pearl-like maiden marry that venom-tongued snake?" (33). Her patient suffering has its own reward when she finds the snake turning to man at last.

The mythical character Amba is ready to marry her lover Salwa. Bheeshma abducts her for his step-brother. Given a choice Salwa rejects her saying he does not have a rightful claim over her as Bheeshma has already won her. Amba has been deserted. She then pursues rigorous penance to revenge Bheeshma. When no one dares to defeat Bheeshma, Amba encounters death in the forest. She has been reborn as Shikhandi and brought up as son to revenge Bheeshma. Amba transforms her fate, hatred against Bheeshma into sweet revenge and glorious triumph. Hariharan says: "She rode the plains of Kurukshetra to taste the heady sweetness of the beloved's in battle" (39). Amba does not involve in self-inflicted suffering like Gandhari and snake woman. She resorts to fight against the injustice heaped on her and womankind in particular.

The stories of grandmother makes Devi acquire multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She develops a mechanism of self-defence against the onslaught. She begins to live a secret life wherein she destroys the evil forces and becomes a woman warrior. She identifies herself with goddess Durga, the destroyer of evil. Devi says: "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).

The fictional characters of Hariharan Mayamma, Sita, Parvatiamma and Devi undergo the same kind of suffering and walk a tight rope for some means of survival. Mayamma, the old house retainer of Devi suffers the most in the novel. She has been married at the early age and has been tortured by her mother-in-law for her childlessness. She undergoes hardships in the name of penance. Her husband tortures her sexually. She says:

He snorted like an angry bull. He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow...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 spirit of revolt is crushed out of her and she becomes an extension of the silent suffering pativirata stri, the devoted suffering wife. She has been even tortured by her son who beats her when she refuses to part her earring. Her mother-in-law curses her even in deathbed. Mayamma bears silently the abuse and condemnation without protest. She feels that success of life for a woman depends on her ability to endure.

Apart from Mayamma, the narrative of *The Thousand Faces of Night* also includes the saga of another equally or perhaps more remarkable woman Sita who was, "a generation away from Mayamma"(136). But Sita too becomes the victim of tradition with the choice she has made in her life to be accepted as a good daughter-in-law. Sita skillfully plays veena and the role of a daughter-in-law. But one day the same music invites the anger of her father-in-law when he finds all things undone in the prayer room. He shouts, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, daughter-in-law?"(30). She decides to be a good wife and daughter-in-law. She says, "Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in-law" (30).

Sita in her pride and anger pulls the strings of her veena and never plays it again in her life. Her self-denial is an act of protest. She then plays the assigned roles of wife, daughter-in-law and mother but entirely on her own terms. In an extended Hindu family, a bride's position is primarily that of a daughter-in-law and not that of a wife. She realises it and casts aside her music with dispassionate ease and restricts herself to the role of a house holder. Sita makes her husband Mahadevan and daughter Devi dependent on her by her strong commanding presence. Devi says, "She was always our anchor-rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of our existence"(16). Of all the woman characters in the novel Sita is the most powerful, for she carves for a niche for herself turning the grievances into success within the traditional role. Hariharan says, "She was familiar with the bold choice made in youth and with the elliptical nuances of the choice that had to be dealt with, held in control, in the years that came after"(108).

Parvatiamma, Devi's mother-in-law suffers from the words of wisdom of her husband. Her husband Baba is a male patriarch who imposes restrictions on the spiritual path of Parvati. But it does not disturb her in seeking the path she has chosen. She gives up all the comforts of life and goes in search of God. She shows the affirmation of self by casting off the theories of Baba. Thereby she breaks away the age-old taboos and rituals.

Devi too finds the male authority overbearing and suffers in the institution of marriage. Her husband Mahesh always on tours remains a shadowy stranger. He views marriage as just another necessity. Whenever Devi expresses her wish to do something she really desires, like learning Sanskrit or taking up a job Mahesh disapproves her interest. Mahesh snubs, "There is so much for you to do at home. What will you do when the baby comes?"(56). From the beginning Devi is sure of the fact that her life with Mahesh might not provide the type of intellectual companionship she has expected. Even after a month of their marriage, he still treats her alien. Devi feels:

A marriage cannot be forced into suddenly being there, it must grow gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling. What about us? What kind of a life will we make together? It seems foolish, too intense a question to ask of this reasonable stranger...for the companionship of habit? (49)

Devi feels the life of loneliness and realises that her education and stay abroad has not prepared her for the married life. She seeks refuge in the words of Baba. While her

grandmother's mythical stories have initiated her into the numerous possibilities of womanhood, Baba's stories define for her the limits of wifehood. She feels entrapped in marriage. A sense of childlessness and continuous rejection from Mahesh makes Devi move towards the sweet music of Gopal. She leaves the oppressive house on Jacaranda and elopes with Gopal, a Hindustani classical singer. She says, "I will soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas..."(95). She finds herself enmeshed in the ragas of Gopal and rejoices over the new relationship:

I am no one, she thought, as she was swept along in the rich current of Gopal's voice, I have no husband or lover, only this blissful anonymity in the darkness, filled with a raga that reaches higher and higher, beyond the earth-bound demands of passion.(128-129)

Devi understands that Gopal's construction of women is no different from Mahesh. Gopal is also a beautiful despot, who cannot see beyond either the passion of raga. This agonises Devi's internal conflict and makes her think of myriad forms of revenge. She gains the power of Goddess Kali and Durga in her fantasy and as a mark of protest she comes out of the male world. She says, "I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with"(95). She banishes the image of a virtuous sacrificial wife Sati, Parvati, Haimavati and Gauri forever from her mind. She acquires a different kind of vision to perceive life around her.

Devi's fantasy gives her the power of Goddess Durga and Kali. She tends to stop drifting between the worlds and seeks an identity of her own. Hariharan says, "She is no longer on the run"(138). Devi realises that the ultimate solution to her sufferings must emerge from within her own self and reaches a conclusion after many years of painful suffering. Devi finds, "Whatever is dependent on others is misery; whatever rests on oneself is happiness"(68). She then comes back to her mother who accepts her with the inviting notes of veena. Hariharan says, "To stay and fight to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning"(139). Devi realises that woman is not primarily a wife or a mother but an individual with her own world cut out for her.

The novel thus projects the three main characters Mayamma, Sita and Devi who walk a tightrope and struggle for some means of survival which they fashion for themselves. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Our human compassion binds us the one to the other –not in pity or patronisingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future". Hariharan projects her women characters with an identity. They no longer remain silent sufferers. She makes them express their agony, protest and determination in life. They learn in due course to arrive at a compromise with a sense of balance in life.

References

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