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New perceptions of truth in the thousand faces of night

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Abstract

Fiction is creation of a space where the writer communicates his ideas by his imagination or based on his experiences. Githa Hariharan accommodates in her fictional space real life situations, outer and inner conflicts, experiences of the mundane and social influences of the society in which one lives. She presents a strong and convincing discourse on the traditional myths and tries to subvert them genuinely with the yearning to create a separate identity for the new woman. She underlines the need to address the issue of identity of the modern woman. As a postmodern writer, she presents her skepticism towards the stereotypical ethical values, gender construction and the institution of marriage. She proposes that in postmodernist era any validation seems to be impossible and unnecessary. New perceptions of truth need to be explored and stated. The anguish of women finds its due echo here. The claim of women is a respectable living and recognition as an individual. Githa presents how the needs of women go unnoticed in a wedlock. By relating the vast spectrum of experiences of women Hariharan counters the grand narrative of marriage and shows how complicated fallacious the stereotypes are. This paper by an in-depth reading of *The Thousand Faces* analyses how Githa Hariharan is one such literary voice who is devoted to the task of unearthing the reality of female psyche and its operation in the postmodern world.

Keywords: Postmodern, gender construction, myths, stereotypes

Introduction

Githa Hariharan approximates the social reality with a postmodernist zoom lens and portrays the workings of a woman's mind with a fine sensibility and a refined sense of perspicacity. Githa has given voice to the modern woman and presented that she is no more an echo of the masculine culture. The idea has been presented to the readers in a convincing manner. Myths are an integral part of human culture and thereby of literature. By the revision of the myths the author questions the ostracised existence of women and the conventional patriarchal customs and practices. The novel is attempt to re-deduce the myths centred around the lives of women. The institution of marriage and the rationality of religious beliefs have been questioned. Myths are an instrument in the society to subvert women and to impose shallow ideology on women. Patriarchy manipulates the definition of morality to suit its own needs and ego.

The novel pictures three women- Devi, Mayamma and Sita, who are victims of patriarchal stifling dominance. Through the stories of these middle class and lower middle class women, the author seeks to sensitise the readers about the pathetic condition of women who oscillate between intoxication and anxiety, trying to carve a separate position for themselves as individual subjects. What they face is humiliation and subversion at the hands of the society. By employing the tales of mythological figures of Gandhari, Amba, Bhishma, Nal-Damyanti, and Padmavati and inter-relating them with the experiences of her protagonists Githa inspires the readers to reassess the myths and their reality. She presents how in almost all the myths women occupy a marginal position and analyses how these myths affect their lives even in the contemporary times. The powerful influence of myths have been accepted by writers as Shashi Deshpande, in *The Intrusion and Other Stories* says:

“Myths condition our ideas so powerfully that often it is difficult to disentangle the reality of what we perceive from what we learn of ourselves through them. ... The myths continue to be a reference point for people in their daily lives and we have so internalised them that they

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are part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity. They are as real as the people around us.” (63)

In a mythical vein, insults are hurled upon women and they are forced to live a sub standard life. They are duped into accepting the fabricated image of a good woman and considered puppets by their masculine counterparts. A melange of impressions have been depicted by the technique of multi-layered narrative which displays the author’s exemplary sensibility and a postmodern approach towards life and literature. She has tried to find a universal solution to the problem of gender construction and presented her disenchantment with the traditional stories that hamper the growth of women. Myths need to be re-examined and retold. There is an ample scope of their re-interpretation.

The novel opens with the very problem of conditioning of a girl child to suit the patriarchal needs. Devi belongs to a traditional South Indian Brahmin family. Though she completes her education in America but after her return she finds her widowed mother, Sita, anxious to get her daughter married to a good suitor, who can confer her daughter financial stability and is well educated. Githa presents how traditional Indian society limits women’s individual growth and development. Devi becomes a victim of the prevalent callous gender discrimination as a daughter and later as a wife. Knowing and expecting that her daughter would be given a secondary status, Sita conditions Devi in the rites and rituals of an arranged marriage as Devi expresses the well-planned way in which her mother compels her to suppress her personality:

“Like a veteran chess player, she made her moves. I have to give her credit for a sense of timing...led me to her carefully laid plans – a marriage for me, a Swamvarya.” (14)

Devi allows her mother to guide her and groom her as per the societal norms and demands. She wears saree, jewels, flowers, and practices speaking softly in front of relatives. Sita succeeds in finding Mahesh, a manager in a regional bank, as a perfect match. Sita entered into the wedlock considering marriage as a sacrament but she found it to a convenient arrangement to the disadvantage of women. Devi was happy for a few days but then her illusion shatters. Mahesh was cold and indifferent towards her feelings. He wanted a meek and submissive wife who would never complain. As Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*: “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as a relative to him, she’s not regarded as an autonomous being....He is subject, he is absolute she is the other.” (5)

Sita feels the burden of inferiority as Mahesh values his professional engagements more than his wife. There is a communication gap between them. She is ready to efface her identity to keep her husband happy but receives no response from the other end and thereby becomes frustrated. She finds solace in the company of Mayamma, the maid who tells her different mythical stories and about her own catastrophic past. Mayamma’s marital life was characterised by discontent as Devi says:

“Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about the lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand... but she had no bitterness.” (135-36)

Mayamma is a victim of domestic violence. Her husband inflicts bruises on her body and the irony is that her mother-in-law supports him. Life has been cruel to her and she loses

her son and her sentimentality for the male world. To her wifehood and motherhood have no meaning. She feels an estrangement with the joyless world. It is in her company that Sita takes the courage to break the myth of an ideal wife and decides to leave Mahesh. She decides to make a new beginning and become alive as an individual. Sita realises:

“To stay and fight, to make sense of it all; she would have to start from the very beginning.” (139)

The stories of Sita and Mayamma are so well woven that they present how women can be helpful to each other in mapping their survival strategies. The story emphasises the significance of Mayamma’s role as a constructive force in motivating Sita to confront the harsh reality and realise her tremendous inner strength. She saves her from succumbing to male domination.

Use of different epical and mythological stories told by different females lend a rich texture to the novel. Sita is overwhelmed by the classical story of Nal-Damayanthi taken from the Mahabharata told to her by her grandmother, Pati. When Sita’s mother arranges her marriage, she reminisces the custom of swamvarya which was held for Draupadi and Damyanthi. Damyanthi espoused Nala as he was robust, handsome and virtuous. The story marvelled her into thinking that by cleverness and intrigue a woman can choose a partner of her desire. So swamvarya came to her as an agency of feminine strength and possibility of choice.

Another story narrated to her by her grandmother is about Gandhari who played a significant role in The Mahabharata. Gandhari was married to a wealthy king but is this enchanted as soon as she learns that her husband was blind. Choosing her survival strategy amidst the restrictive powers of the world, Gandhari takes the strong decision of remaining blind folded for the rest of her life. She does not give to any persuasion by her husband or relatives. An uncommon strength of will and action is displayed by her without caring for any assessment by others. We can say that she does not put her armaments against the men but in fact puts them in their limits. She vents her feelings and indignation by sustaining the inconvenience. The story of Gandhari is somewhat akin to that of Sita, Devi’s mother who is forbidden by her father-in-law to play Veena without any consideration of her love for music.

The story of Amba who is kidnapped by Bhishma at the time of her swamvarya, and later her revenge on Bhishma is also a presentation of how a strong woman stood up against exploitation and fought for her entity and rights. She resisted the predatory attitude of the male chauvinistic society.

All these mythical tales and their interpretations made Sita dream more and more about female figures who avenged their wrong-doers. As she says:

“I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut of the evil magical demons heads.”(41)

Githa presents how the present consciousness of Devi is profoundly embedded and influenced by the mythical imaginings of the past.

Thus, by reading of the myths and co-relating them with the contemporary characters like Sita, alternate cultural reinterpretations can be suggested. Sita oscillates between acceptance and resistance. Past experience cannot be the final arbiter but it can be helpful to expand the purview of intellectual scrutiny, The mythical framework can be crucial to the understanding of the religious as well as cultural fabric of a nation but at the same time they can become carriers of identity and sovereignty emerging within the

culture. The return to mythology can serve both as a warning against the trampling of human rights specially those of the marginalised section of the society as well as can fuel postmodern awareness of the need of an unabated self-hood and individuality.

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