

A Journey of a Woman through Three Generations: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, “she does not have what it takes”. They will say, “Women don't have what it takes.”⁴

- Clare Boothe Luce

Aristotle possessed a view, ‘*the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.*’ Throughout long history ‘Feminism’ as a word may have come into English usage in 1890s but women’s struggle to resist patriarchy started much back. Toril Moi explains:

- Feminist – a political position
- Female – a matter of biology
- Feminine – a set of culturally defined features

The distinction between later two becomes the source and force of feminism. The feminist movement “*includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex.*”² so says David Bouchier in the ‘Introduction’ to his book *The Feminist Challenge*.

The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent oppression.

In the mid-1800s the term ‘Feminism’ was used to refer to ‘*the qualities of females*’ and it was not until after the First International Women’s Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term ‘*feministe*’, was used regularly in English for a brief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Although the term ‘Feminism’ in English is rooted in the mobilization for woman suffrage in Europe and the US during the late 19th and early 20th century; of course, efforts to obtain justice for women did not begin or end with this period of activism.

Here in this paper, I wish to throw light towards Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*, which is not exactly considered a feministic work of art, however, aptly depicts the sensibilities of a woman. In the resulting book she wove together the lives of three women belonging to three generations in Madras in the South of India. The book shows how the women are torn between tradition and modernity while trying to shape their lives in their own ways; in so doing, they recall and, in a way, reinterpret the great myths recorded in Sanskrit: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to show changes in the relationship between the sexes.

She has produced an interesting array of female protagonist who suffers within the framework of marriage and shows that how marriages, which are supposed to be the most beautiful chapter of a woman’s life, end up being the most difficult one.

Githa Hariharan, mainly interested in the portrayal of women characters, explores in her first award winning novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* the marriages, old traditional values, story and myth, passion and loneliness in the life of Indian women. Marriage becomes an instrument of female exploitation and sub negation leading to trivialities lack of communication, loneliness, hollowness and incapacity. Simone de Beavouir writes, “*It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates women*”¹ (p496).

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* as a title right from the outset gives an idea of what is to come. This novel is a story of three generations which puts forward three different ways of living, looking at a woman and understanding the situation that they face from the society as well as within. Githa Hariharan pontificates at three characters each justifying the time in which they lived.

Though the novel talks about three generations – Devi, Sita and Mayamma, the stories of several minor characters are inter woven. Through these three characters Githa Hariharan pretty much brings forward the similar situation of the thousands of women, who are in the same situation, without faces, are shown by darting at the three major lady characters and as a result night symbolizes woman and, more importantly, her condition wherein there is perhaps no hope, eternal pessimism, helplessness and her situation across the time span of the characters lived, which never converts itself from night to day which signifies hope. Talking about thousand faces, Hariharan shares the life incidents of certain female characters which speak of the plight of a woman with a view to exemplify the faces. But Githa Hariharan has majority chosen her three characters to represent thousand of women going through similar situation.

The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the keynote of the co-ordinal problem i.e. the conditioning of a girl child. Devi, the daughter of Sita and Mahadevan, has been given best upbringing. She represents the last generation, the modern one, is free and is capable of taking individual decisions on individual grounds. Since childhood she has seen strict atmosphere at home which moderates her behavior, manners, ethics, values etc. She, in her childhood, pays visit to her grandmother's place during the vacation. Her grandmother tells her mythical stories everyday.

The myths are the specific elements or the techniques which represent the feminist ideology in this novel. Women, especially in the role of mothers and grandmother, show concern in encouraging their daughters to follow the stereotypes. The myths of Parvati, Sita and Savitri are built up and repeated to promote the traditional image of women which leads to selfless behaviour and in turn, to insensitivity and injustice. Devi's grandmother's stories narrated to her, "were a prelude to my (Devi's) womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities"⁶ (p51). The stories of Gandhari, Danyanti and Amba embossed on the psyche of the grandmother – symbolic of self sacrifice, ironically, bring out the victimization of these symbolic, timeless characters. The very virtues praised in their characters are instrumental in their suffering. Even today, these stories become dictums for women and lay down a chalked path to be adhered to.

These stories and their morals are narrated to prepare her role of an ideal wife, imbibing the qualities of self sacrifice, empathy tolerance and nurturing. "Devi's father-in-law, a retired Sanskrit professor too tells her mythological stories of women who had already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear and have a centre point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife"⁶ (pg 51). His advice to Devi through various stories and statements of ideal womanhood are strewn all over the text and his statements about how an ideal woman ought to epitomize the conventional gender attitude are shared by most males. Through mythological tales of Syama Shashtri, Thagaraya, Narayan Tirath, Jayadeva, he documents the patriarchal structures, the dynamics of family and life under paternal authority which preach that women have to be unvoiced, undemanding and self sacrificing centering their lives on their husbands.

Hariharan has presented three generations but through these three characters, she largely tries to show the changing condition of a woman from generation to generation. With the feminist movement, there is, no doubt, found improvement; however, if a woman is set free from one problem, another social problem is waiting in the wings. Focusing on the earlier generation of them all, Mayamma, then her major area of concern was physical harassment which by far has been tried to overcome, then if talking about Sita, her major problem was the dreams and passions of woman which are given less importance whereas in case of Devi it largely demands the fulfillment of emotional needs rather than mere physical ones. Apart from these three major characters, there are the characters like Lakshmiamma, Gauri, Uma etc.; whose stories share with the readers the deprived condition of woman in India. But the above three characters are playing the role of mouthpiece of all the thousands of woman in India who are suffering the same problems.

Unknowingly she offers comparative study when Devi rebels and elopes with Gopal. The first generation Mayamma kept on suffering, she did not raise her voice at all. Mayamma always was submissive to the social norms. She, belonging to the first generation in the characters within the novel, is compelled to go through the motions and survives as she eventually has no opinion of her own. However, at a later stage, as the time changes and so does the situation, she perhaps relates to Devi and her thought processes because she always wanted to be like her but was never able to simply due to the time in which she was living; and, as a result, suggests Devi to break the shackles and move away from this life wherein she had no identify of her own. She makes us aware of

her perspective towards life by suggesting Devi to run away from her spouse house. It can be said that Devi proves to be a binocular through which Mayamma makes us aware of her vision about and towards life.

Taking a look at the oldest generation Mayamma, then she was forced to marry at the tender age of twelve. Our epics, Vedas and puranas envisage marriage not as a mere social instrument, but also as a moral weapon that both stabilize and elevate the moral stature of an individual. But unfortunately, it is an irony of fate that in a post modernist world, such esteemed institutions are currently subject to doubt, cynicism and erosion. She was expected to have babies just after a year of her marriage. As when she failed to fulfill the expectations of her in-laws, she was forced to keep fast and follow several of rituals.

“She woke up at four in the morning and walked among the blue tipped shadows to the pond. She prayed, made vows, dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness. She starved every other day, she gave up salt and Tamarind. She tied little wicker basket with crimson strips of cloth on the tree dedicated to Jaganmata. She meditated for hours before a pan of clear water, representative of the gold complexioned Shashtri, giver of children. She fed the snake her rice and curds; she bathed all conquering lingam with sandalwood, milk and her tear of ardour.”⁶(p80-81)

After ten long years of her marriage she could give birth to her son but as he turned fourteen he threatened his mother and took away her gold bangles. After eight years of her son's birth, her husband ran away from the house. She single handedly had to look to the upbringing of her son. But the result was the betrayal only. Here, the condition of a woman is eye catchy, firstly she is forced to marry at the early age then she is expected to have babies neglecting the fact that a female body requires time for the hormonal changes and attaining the age of puberty after following breath taking rituals, she manages to have babies and ultimately to face betrayal. Mayamma's story speaks of major physical suffering which consists of fasts and sexual harassment. The story which resembles to her is of Uma Devi's cousin who was motherless child.

Her husband and her father drank till she was stupefied with fear, even her girlhood, spend with an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother, had not prepared her for this trial. Her foreboding grew into terror when her drunken father in law kissed her roughly on the lips⁶ (p35).

The second generation Sita had her problems which showed little improved condition as it was not physical and direct social blows. Her problems were more reflecting the suppression of woman. Apparently there was no problem as such but her dreams and ambition were suppressed. She even had to lead a widowed life on which we find society's eye constantly observing her deeds and actions. When she returned from Africa after her husband's death, she was welcomed by the relatives who promised her of keeping away the loneliness of widowhood. But she alone managed to find a perfect match for her daughter and arranged the whole wedding. Sita's character from the beginning is shown as a very polite and submissive one as she plays veena for an hour when her matrimonial meeting was arranged as per her in law's wish and soon after the marriage tears off the strings of veena submitting herself politely to make her social life better. This is in fact, the expectation which society keeps that a woman should always be submissive and act according to the wish of the family and the society around; then and then only she is given the tag of an ideal woman. Sita turns out to be an ideal daughter in law not in terms of her behavior but because of her submissive nature wherein she has to give in because of her family pressures and loses the identity of her own which happens more often than not when a woman is married. Because of this, she wants her daughter to be almost a replica of what she is and submit herself to the duties of her family after her marriage.

Looking into the novel, there is a door which is closed by the society which Mayamma is unable to open; Sita has the key but cannot open due to responsibilities whereas Devi unlocks that door. Hariharan has very rightly paid attention to the progress of woman's condition and this; she has shown to the readers by showing the journey of all three women covering all the three generations. She has focused on how time passes and the

condition of woman improvised. It is not that the problems of women come to an end but their condition certainly gets better or at least their reactions shape and try to deal with it in a better way.

Hariharan's sensitive women characters are trapped in the whirlpool of traditions, old values, myths and modernity and have become the victims of gross gender discrimination prevailing in the conservative male – dominated society. **Baba**, Devi's father in law says, "*The housewife should always be joyous adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wears restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word, and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does*"⁶ (ibid, p70-71).

To keep women confined and suppressed, old conservative values and ideas were supported by the male world and women were forced to face every challenge to follow these ideologies (if taken as ideologies.)

Parvatiamma, Devi's mother in law a woman of rare beauty, married at an early age, 'spend more and more time in room doing puja and singing bhajans. But one day, left her husband's house never to return back again. Baba said – "*She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a home coming.*"⁶ (ibid, p64)

Laxshmiamma is a "*widowed aunt, close to seventy live alone in a corner of the dilapidated little family house in the agraharam*"⁶ (ibid, p125). A brazen life rats, mongoose, pigeons, lizards hunted in her house. The sole heir to her family wealth, her son, lives miles away in a town, sending money once a month which later stopper, "*a line to say he was busy*"⁶ (ibid, p 125). She wailed at impatient neighbours homes due to loneliness and negligence.

Gauri, Annapurna, Uma – all women led isolated and neglected lives searching their own self their existence and identity in this patriarchal society.

Mahesh – Devi's husband escapist in name of business tours, enjoys drinking parties, golf club and has left Devi alone – "*alone with Mayamma and Baba's orphaned books*"⁶ (ibid, p69).

The characters in Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* are victims of loneliness, emptiness; and are continuously in search for self discovery and their place/position in the society. She has succeeded in giving the readers the glimpses of the interior life of the woman characters, at both psychological and social levels. Devi, the protagonist is searching her identity through knowing herself and self liberation. Thus, the novel exploring the world of women can be read as women's text. "*A novel that every Indian woman must read and every Indian man*".-Society

The feminine traits like empathy, care, nurturing, tolerance, sensitivity to the needs of the others, self-sacrifice are not only considered inferior to the masculine traits like autonomy, individual success, power and careerism but are also devalued. This is the chief consequence of patriarchal culture. Being raised as daughters in a patriarchal society, women start seeing and believing themselves as inferior. They accept their identity as subordinates to the dominant group. As a result, a woman's mothering "*produces psychological self definition and capacities and this self definition in men*"³ (1978:208). Within the family, the child perceives and takes cues from the way males are treated. Usually, mothers idealize masculinity and present the fathers to the children as important persons to the extent of showcasing them as idols on whom they focus their maximum attention. This attitude has many repercussions.

Girls become wary and learn that they have to take care of the others needs whereas boys come to know very early that their needs will be taken care of in the process of acquisition of a gendered masculine self a boy comes to deny identification with a relationship to his mother and reject what he takes to be the feminine world. As a result, a boy represses those qualities he takes to be feminine in the social world. Thus the woman's mothering produces daughters with the capacities for nurturing and sons with an individuated and autonomous sense of self.

Githa Hariharan in one of her interview when asked about her being feminist writer responded that

"There are two questions here, am I am writer particularly concerned with "women issues"? And am I a feminist? The answer to both, the questions is 'yes' To make it quite clear that in my life, my choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. I want to say this because many women are very anxious for some reason to say "I am a humanist not a feminist", because there are people in the world who misunderstand the word or have done disservice to the word. You can't use most words then! And anyway,

however, you define yourself all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism along with the ideas of Freud and Marx, and this goes both for men and women of course. So the answer to your question is that, I am a writer (As opposed to a women writer) who is a feminist along with several other things!

Let me make a little digression here: some of my women friends were a bit unhappy with the ending of *The Thousand Faces of Night*. They would say thing like “First of all you’ve got this wimpy women” you know a lot of people to think you first novel is autobiographical and of course those who know me know that between Devi and me like many leagues and I’d say, “In college I knew many girls in the hostel who lived pretty wild lives, and the next thing you heard of them, they had arranged marriages. And that is partly what I wanted to understand by putting such a life in a context”. And at the end she goes to another man! You know the ultimate crime! Of course use would have liked her to immediately march to parliament for women’s rights!⁵

To my mind this novel carries the undertone of feminism throughout and is handled with a lot of care and subtlety. The writer has weaved or fabric of women, her issues, her life and how she has changed but the situation somehow has not. It deals with the inner life and spaces of women who have to submit themselves to various pressures and situations and how they deal with it or rather are allowed to deal with it. External world influences their life so much that their opinion at the end is not their own. By looking into the three generations we come across one common factor that even if the time changes the situation does not. For example, Devi in spite of being educated and has opinions of her own is not allowed to exercise them and as a result helplessness overshadows the individuality of a woman.

We can, instead, bracket it as a work which deals with the issues that women come across many different situations in life and how women have to tackle with certain adjustment problems especially in India, as for her in today’s times more often than not family concerns over power her own. I would like to conclude by taking a stand of my own on the very term feminism which is fabricated in this novel and has made a very strong impact on my mind that feminism after all is not anti-man but is anti social and as a result men have to play a significant role in bringing about a change of a certain kind wherein women don’t have to necessarily demand respect but can command.

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