



FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Female consciousness is a movement to liberate woman herself from her patriarchal attitudes and stereotyped behavioral pattern and suffocating the patterns might be woman conforms to these due to fear and the feeling of enslavement. All the women of her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* are conscious in various levels and occasions. Though they are conscious, they are unable to overcome the stamp which is practiced by the society traditionally. All her women feel comfort by remembering their past memories of the stories told by the elders especially their grandmothers. They feel solace through their ghosts of the past. *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents the lash about of three women of consecutive generations for their survival in their relationship with man and society. The lives of three women Mayamma, Sita, and Devi who symbolize three different generations age-old, middle, and modern. The novel pictures more than a thousand faces of women who are silent harassed for their endurance in the dark with despair and distress in the patriarchal civilization.

KEYWORDS: consciousness, patriarchal, traditionally, memories, survival, generations, civilization.

Devi, the protagonist of the novel listens to the stories, fables, and myths told by different narrators like her grandmother and the maidservant, Mayamma of the novel that include ideal woman protagonists like Parvati, Sita who follow in the footsteps of their husbands, and the stories of ferocious women like Gandari, Ambika, Ambalika, and Amba who take their revenge. Devi in her adolescence has listened to her grandmother's stories which were drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, their focus is on women's pride, destiny, and self-sacrifice. The status of her imagined heroines from the stories gives her a change in her mind.

Devi as a impractical personality likes the modern life. But her homecoming sucks her back to conventional Indian family life. Though she has lived in America for a few years she still becomes susceptible to her milieu and civilization. Devi gives us the image of a new generation who follows the footsteps of mythical characters of the stories told to neither her nor the elder women like Mayamma and Sita who, sacrifice their individual interests for the happiness of the family. The mythical characters impress her and she is conscious of her Indian ethnicity.

The stories of her grandmother which are drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, focus is on her narration on the lead up to her womanhood, a commencement into deep possibilities. Devi understands that the stories of women she knows are more filthy than their legendary counterparts and wants to do something as a sign of remonstrance equal to the heroines she grew up with. She imagines herself the very personification of the avenging goddess. This perception of Devi signifies the events that are looked for to happen and her building up of her mind to revolt against any sort of injustice to her in the course of her life. After returning from America Devi conforms some difficulties in making adjustments to day-to-day realities but soon realizes it is not very easy to change the old order of things only because she has returned from a brave new world but homecoming sucks her back to traditional family life. Yet she wants to be conscious of her life not to be trapped by the traditional values and her mother Sita is role model to her.

Devi is projected for an arranged marriage by her mother and she could not neglect her mother's arrangement and Devi with her husband Mahesh moves to Bangalore after her marriage. He works for a multinational company as a Regional Manager and he needs to travel a great deal leaving Devi alone. Being a manager he believes in managing everything in life as he does for his company and marriage is just a required milestone to him. He is unable to pull himself out from emotional filthiness and he is a poor manager of emotions; his faint nature could never make him a reliable husband.

When Mahesh is on tours Devi feels "like a child whose summer holiday had slipped away from her when she was not looking" (50). She follows the ways of life to a traditional woman from the stories of Baba, her father-in-law, a retired Sanskrit Professor who tells her a few stories of ideal mythical women, virtuously of womanhood and the path of salvation to a woman. She feels that the stories of Baba demand her to lead a traditional Indian life. His stories of saints and their wives endorse the traditional Hindu concept of Dharma. He elaborates codes of virtuous women and the role to be played by a woman in married life.

Babha points that the women are led into bakthi only by serving their husbands but no salvation of their personal to search. Summing up all his illustrative sto-

ries Baba says that a sinner is released from his or her sins only through penance. He also tells her the stories of many traditional Hindu philosophies and the stories introduce her to the complexities of the Hindu traditional thought and philosophy even after her marriage. Devi relates her empty life with the traditional women and their duties to their men. A woman is corned by either men or women throughout her life in the form of tradition and culture but men are free from this. As Mahesh is not governed by anybody but Devi is monitored by her father-in-law though she is a matured woman.

Devi tries to fit herself in the role of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law just as her mother did years ago. Her mother Sita accepts the life as it is given by her family that of being obedient to her father-in-law's words. But Devi feels that her education has not prepared her for the vast, yawning chapters of her womanhood. Devi finds that her life is very dull and boring with so much of leisure; she seeks Mahesh's permission to learn Sanskrit to understand Baba's quotations better. But Mahesh simply neglects her request and the wish at least to play cards with him is mercilessly disapproved. He never speaks a single affectionate word to Devi. But Mahesh satisfies his physical desires without paying any attention to Devi's feelings and emotions and his insensitiveness and inability to understand her properly shocks her and gives rise to a feeling of splendid loneliness in her. Devi's depressed life represents thousands of women's life and they expect the hands of their husband's for every thing yet mostly they are neglected. Mahesh views the role of a wife as confined to the hours only. He does not even take into account her education. Devi's married life is quite unhappy and she finds many things lacking in her life. She finds herself in a deep despair and disappointment and feels marriage has been imposed on her and she considers marriage a torture to her and it hangs like a knife above her neck always.

Devi finds herself entrapped in the marital bond and feels her freedom is being thwarted, the gaping emptiness threatening her very existence. She remains alone in the house with Mayamma, the old housekeeper and feels a terrible loneliness and a state of uselessness. Baba convinces Devi only but not Mahesh and to him women only have to maintain Indian tradition but not men.

Her sense of idleness overcomes as her father-in-law passes away and her gentle mother-in-law Parvathamma leaves the house to seek salvation away. She cannot change the mentality of her husband and all her efforts get failure that becomes conscious of her state and leaves home because she is unable to change the attitude of men in her life and she represents the modern women. Bharathi Mukherjee suggests a self consciousness of the novelist to explain to shadowy and indeterminate reader the nuances of the civilization essence of India.

Devi is quite disappointed and angry that she is denied her individual freedom and compelled to follow her husband's self-contained footprints with clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves. Mahesh is totally indifferent towards Devi and turns his house a place for parties and playing cards with his friends for many times without considering the feelings of his life partner and she becomes conscious that her life is unhappy and meaningless and she thinks some other way to relieve herself like contemporary women. Devi finds failure both in verbal and physical satisfaction with her husband Mahesh and she feels no safe and security with him. She lives like a foreigner in her own home with her own family members and she is neglected by her own life partner without any right grounds. Devi is taken to a gynecologist by her husband.

The doctor bristles with impatience at Devi, because of her inability to get pregnancy. This shows the unfortunate social predicament inflicted even in the twenty first century. Devi undergoes the same humiliation that had Mayamma, an illiterate village woman did a few decades ago. The only difference is technological variations. The early people were compelled to suffer through penance; the modern women are humiliated through modern technology like smear, injection, and fertility centers. This rebellious attitude makes her to a blissful deadness of Gopal's music, a Hindustani classical singer, her neighbour. She is impressed by his music first and then her love towards him. She finds comfort in the company of Gopal's music and then him. He fills the gap which is missing with Mahesh. Devi wants to humiliate Mahesh by condemning him to a life without a wife and child. Her decision to leave Mahesh and go with Gopal is based on her investigation into the pathetic lives of Mayamma and her mother Sita. Devi does not want to condemn herself to such self-sacrificial life and wants to walk out on Mahesh. Her consciousness about the trapped life makes her to leave Mahesh.

Devi imagines herself resembling mythical heroines, a relation with goddess and existence of the other world. She removes the images of sacrificial wives like Parvathi and Mayamma. She wants to be rebellious like Durga or like Kali and she recalls Kritya whom she read in Baba's book dealing with suffering and revenge of a ferocious woman. This shows her consciousness and Devi elopes with Gopal for a life which is failed form Mahesh. But she finds her life with Gopal is also like that of a due and he is also not at all inferior to Mahesh and both are in the same track but in different way of humiliating women. She locates herself in her isolated corner and outsider forever on the fringes of a less ambivalent identity. Thus Mahesh and Gopal failed to perceive her emotions and soul. Devi realizes that in the male oriented society, it is difficult to survive and find reliability for her emotions because for men, women have always been primarily an object of sex and pleasure. Now she becomes conscious about her state and plans for another step to move her life. She does not weep or worry about the blind society and now she is capable to take another decision without spending time as in her early life with Mahesh.

Devi leaves Gopal while he was in a deep sleep covering the mirror with the peacock's neck coloured sari to cover the images that reflect the surroundings. It symbolizes her wish not to carry forward her past memories into future as she plans to start a new life afresh with her mother. She feels courageous and confident and determines to leave from confinement to a state of self-identity. She gains the strength to assert herself and survive on her own with her mother. She courageously leaves Gopal to her mother's house to begin new life. The music of her mother's Veena welcomes her to the house to begin her battle all over once again anew. Devi represents the present-day intellectual woman, confronts loneliness and alienation. Her decision making authority shows her consciousness. Though she lacks the will to choose and her early decisions are wavering, we note the maturity in her character. Initially, she is easily influenced by collective role expectations; she quits the U.S. and leaves behind Dan because of a sense of filial piety, marries Mahesh as a good daughter should attempt to be a full-time wife and house maker as an Indian pativrata should. Gradually she shows her resolve in walking out with Mahesh and Gopal even greater determination in walking out on Gopal.

Devi relates her with all the stories she can remember and all the stories and lessons have one moral for Devi and that in how to be a good woman. Dan, her boyfriend in America, her husband Mahesh, and her extra-marital affair with Gopal, all men in her life prove to be a failure and cannot fulfill her emotional needs. Githa Hariharan does not raise her voice against the society where she fails. The secret fear of rejection and obsession for security is enough to prevent her from acting on her own. Yet Devi learns about her cravings, her desires, her urges and pursuits both hidden as well as revealed. To be really a revolutionary, one must step out of the outdated pattern of the society. She accepts the fact that a strong, dominate desire never brings peace, but only builds an imprisoning wall around itself. She spends some time in conflict and alienation like a prisoner within the walls of her own mind, and she decides to go back to her mother with whom she can live a better and respectable life. Finally, her happy and cheerful journey from Bangalore to Madras and her confident steps towards her mother indicate her new positive approach towards life and consciousness.

Another major woman is Sita, the mother of Devi, a cool, confident and middle aged woman has earlier embraced her fate silently. Her life represents a model between the two extreme generations of Mayamma and Devi. The father-in-law discourages Sita even for her choice of playing Veena when she is free. Sita immediately hung over the Veena for a minute in her pride and anger, and reached for the strings of her precious Veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. She never touches the Veena again and chooses to become a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law as her father-in-law says. This role is intended to women for centuries as social conventions that of a wife and daughter-in-law. She accepts the life as it is forced to her without any question. She sacrifices her desire, longing, and feelings everything to her family. The need for a woman to create a role for herself and to approximate to a definition of that image is depicted in the picture of a woman of Sita's family. She knows how a woman makes a career of housekeeping and makes herself integral to the mechanics of daily existence. Sita has only one straight path to tread-wifedom and later motherhood. Sita becomes a good housekeeper and helps her husband in all directions and sacri-

fices her own feelings and thoughts for the sake of her husband and her family members.

Sita is a practical woman and not moved by dreams and the noble life of goddess, and she does not want Devi to travel in dreams too. Devi's father Mahadevan's sudden death from Africa made both Devi and Sita back to Madras. Being a woman Sita gives free room to indulge in a few minor and sign crabbiness, gets a scholarship for Devi to study in America, and wisely manages to get her studies and backs from America. Sita has led a life of an ideal woman of India and she was not prepared for any unexpected betrayal of Devi with Gopal. Sita anticipates Devi comes back to her mother's home to restart her life. Sita hates any illusion and even banished Devi's phantom gods and goddesses to their rightful place for now. Sita leads her life with bleak will power; at the end of the novel she appears as strong as ever and ready for introspection. The freshly-dusted Veena signifies the possibility of her now attempting to achieve what she had denied herself all these years. She does not want to struggle with the society she is wounded.

Sita lives according to her own rules; she is not prepared for a sudden betrayal of Devi with Gopal. Sita sees her life in its entirety, she realizes that it is too lasted for sudden reversals, or a fresh start outside the parameters, she had constructed, or allowed to be constructed, around her. Sita has seen in her life the inevitability of cause and effect the interplay between situations and options and now Sita spent her rage, her acrid bitterness on the over-pruned plants Sita's entire life is dedicated to only one ideal to being the ideal woman. And she is willing to pay any price for it even at the end of the novel, we see her as resilient as ever and ready for merciless introspection.

Mayamma, the old caretaker narrates her tale of tears and harrowing experiences as wife and daughter-in-law to Devi. She is wedded at the age of twelve to a worthless gambler.

Mayamma is totally ill-treated by her husband and her mother-in-law and her husband never considers her a human being. But she does not revolt against humiliation or injustice offered by the society of her own, she also accepts the things as it is without any proclamation like a traditional Indian woman who sacrifices everything for her family. A woman must be restrict herself to a woman's place and respects herself in this role. The main tragedy is; if patriarchy considers a woman inferior; the female psyche is not different from this. She considers herself inadequate in herself and thinks that a woman must seek her identity and self-fulfillment through masculine aspiration. A woman should remain passive, content pleasing to her man.

Mayamma after ten long years of penance is blessed with a son born on Diwali. After eight years of his birth her husband leaves her without a word worn into middle age with dissipated excess, disappeared, taking with him all the money in the house. Her mother-in-law says that Mayamma is responsible for her son's disappearance. Mayamma never once questions the violence, raises a voice or a finger or tries to run away from this living of hell. In spite of no happiness with her husband and son, she is able to be a bed-rock to her family. While her husband calls her a shameless hussy and kicked her after a night of whoring in the rain her mother-in-law fed her yesterday's rice she is admiring her new sari. In order to propitiate the gods so as to beget a son Mayamma tolerates all kinds of cruelty from her family and lives without raising a word and which shows the sacrificing nature of typical women of India and proves the attitude of traditional women.

In India the traditional women are socialized into believing in their own empowerment through chastity and fidelity; through sacrifice they see themselves as achieving both sublimation and strength. They have created strength out of their inferiority and weakness through a rich and imaginative mythology women are narcotized into accepting the ideology that genuine power lies in women's ability to sacrifice, in gaining spiritual strength by denying them access to power or the means to it.

To her generation of Indian women, life meant merely accepting one's fate without as much as murmur and it symbolizes the innate strength of the woman who is able to come back to normalcy even after shocking troubles. Mayamma is a typical Indian woman who accepts her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as was expected of her. She bears the brunt of cruelty that the society has ordained for a woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman, and a mother. She represents the generation of Indian women who feel life is merely accepting and adjusting to one's destiny without complaint by following the Karma Sutra. Women of her generation are meek, submissive, and bound to the traditions of family and the institution of marriage. She makes no choice in her own life yet lives through other women like Sita and later even Devi. Though she is conscious about the injustice she does not like to raise a voice against the world.

The Thousand Faces Night webs the struggle of three women of successive generations for their survival in their relationship with men and society. The novel reveals more than a thousand faces of women who are still struggling for their survival in the dark with despair and displeasure in the patriarchal society. As she probes deeper and deeper into the inner landscape of her women, she encounters terrible onslaughts heaped upon them. They have been subjected to awe and rick-

ety, distorted, dehumanized, injured and bleeding lots altogether. Amidst such absurdity, sickness, revulsion, and bedlam when the world becomes insufferable, they are nearly on their path of self-immolation, obliteration as a mark of protest or revolt. Thus the novel projects the three main characters, Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, who walked a tightrope and thrash about for some balance for some means of survival they could inclination for themselves.

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