

Masked Women and Myths in “*The Thousand Faces of Night*”

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Abstract

The term ‘*Myth*’ has a series of controversies associated with its meaning and interpretation. Myth is believed to be an intellectual creation of ancient man. They are culture specific ideas, beliefs, narratives etc. which are created to enlighten humans of morality, ethics, responsibility, obligations etc. The main focus of the paper would be to employ mythology from feministic perspective. Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*¹ highlights the domination and subjugation of women (i.e. victimhood) in male-centered set-up. The writer opts for mythological stories (*Mahabharata* and *Folktales*) as patriarchal discourse to lend voice to the silenced females. It is interesting to note that even in mythological works women are illustrated as subjects/objects of sheer violence. Hariharan claims that woman characters like Mayamma and Devi silently accept all the discrimination, suppression, and protest assertively against the forces of patriarchy are representative of transitional women. More significantly, Hariharan urges for a progressive society where women can exercise their personal space. Through a careful depiction of various myths and folktales, Hariharan wants to project the self-realization and psychological consciousness.

Keywords: Myths, Folklore, Feminist, Patriarchal, Oppression

Introduction

The term ‘*Myth*’ has a series of controversies associated with its meaning and interpretation. Many have labelled it as having disparaged connotations (something false, untrue and unrealistic). Myth is believed to be an intellectual creation of ancient man. In Indian folktales and oral narratives, myths have gained special significance/position. Myths are independently employed across cultures since time immemorial. In simple terms, they are culture specific ideas, beliefs, narratives etc which are created to enlighten humans of morality, ethics, responsibility, obligations etc. They are utilized in conjunction with symbols which have varied deep meanings attached to it:

Myths are universal because they operate through symbols. In effect, myths are not simple narratives, but rather explanations of reality (or rather the reality that a given culture feels is theirs) that change over time. (Arzu 29)¹

Besides, George Thomson describes his viewpoint of Mythology thus, “Mythology operates in and through the imagination” (Thomson 65).

Myths and conventional stories consist of actions that are clearly ancient (eerie and idealistic). Myths are usually asserted as overstated or concocted stories from the legends. A myth is regarded as a story connecting symbols that can draw various implications with ethics. They are constructed as accounts as they uphold spiritual or divine essence. Myths propagate the worth of culture and codes of life. Myths are eternal narratives for establishing a progressive society. A colossal change of significance can be viewed between the myths depicted in literature and true myths, but literary myths are no less capable of emphasizing a legendary status to the work. Githa Hariharan endeavours to incorporate sense to her arguments about women position in the society by referring/ utilizing the mythical elements.

Women in Hariharan’s novels are beautifully infused with dexterity to highlight the critical issues concerning them. They are multi-faceted, hardworking, selfless, sacrificing and caring. In today’s technological world, the positions of women are getting better in almost every field of work. We can see that women are becoming economically sound. Their fight for their basic rights is the result of the self-realization and psychological consciousness. Contemporary woman writers such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi, Githa Hariharan, Amrita Pritam, Baby Halder and several others have been role models for every woman who is fighting for self-identity in their respective domain. One of the best things is that woman writers (who were also victims of injustice and discrimination) are writing for women. Even in mythological works, women are illustrated as subjects/objects of violence. Women’ position (status) in myths and legends were also not secured. Their patience and fighting spirit were also tasted by their critical situations. Suffering and violence experienced by the mythical women figures served several divine purposes. The Almighty sought to situate some examples for the entire humanity with the sufferings of mythological women characters who chaste, righteous possessing godly traits. Some of the

¹ Canivell María Odette Arzú and Richard Barber in their book *Literary Narratives and the Cultural Imagination: King Arthur and Don Quixote as National Heroes* studies traditional Arthurian legend (Arthur and Quixote as national heroes). It briefly underlines the hyped heroes that are rare in these ultra-modern days. It challenges orthodox and fashionable views. The writers thoroughly discussed the implication of myth.

mythological women figures, for instance, **Draupadi, Gandhari, Sita, Mandodari**² and several others suffered immensely at the hands of the patriarchal system.

The Indian woman writers lent voice and action to the mute woman sufferers who were indecisive of their role in the family and society. These woman writers depicted every silent emotion and reaction of the woman to elevate consciousness of the self. Like other well-known Indian woman writers of English, Githa Hariharan has a sound knowledge of people and the world she lives in. In one of her recent published interviews, she declares that “The business of the writer . . . is to break down all man-made walls, probe and expose all forms of oppression and celebrate all forms of resistance” (Mitra)³. She wishes to channelize her efforts towards woman upliftment. In this context, she considers the self-awareness and emancipation from the rigid social construction as utmost priority. She feels that women before liberation are fragile, indecisive, unsure and most importantly ignorant of their rights. They continue to sacrifice, endure and live their life with the same intensity in the family/society. They prefer taking risky decisions to overcome their daily obstacles but it hardly changes their hostile life and they feel more trapped with it. This paper portrays the mythical elements from ancient myths introduced by Gita Hariharan to justify and upgrade her women’s position in the progressive society.

Githa Hariharan felt that her novel would be purposeful with symbolic meanings if she makes use of myths to highlight her viewpoint to narrate a feministic story. For this noble motive, she chooses mythological stories to give life to her women characters. More than societal customs/traditions laid for women, she believes that women should be given ample privilege and space to express themselves. Though at the inception of writing the novel, she felt weird and puzzled she backs and places her women characters. Similarly, the same puzzled mindset of Hariharan is recorded in her essay entitled “The Unknown Corner – A Writer’s Bank of Myths”:

When I was writing my first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, I was genuinely puzzled by the apparent thinness of my main characters’ lives. Then I realised that if I was to do their individual voices justice, I would have to fill in the background with a thousand voices of all the real and mythical heroines whose life stories tell these three women how to live, in both normative and subversive ways . . . I have been influenced by the timeless and sophisticated Indian story-telling traditions – these include classical texts

² In Rabb’s *Staging Resistance Critical Study of Plays by Women in English Translation* (a published Ph.D. Dissertation), **Draupadi, Gandhari, Sita, Mandodari** have been represented as mythical figures performing wifely obligations. They are portrayed mythological heroines who adhere to traditional values and norms with raising their voices. In Hindu mythology, these women’ voices were silenced so as to establish social and traditional norms. *Refer page no. 95.

³ Ipshita Mitra in her online article ‘Voices of Dalit Women More Marginal Than Men – That’s Why Their Resistance Hits Hard,’ points out the real status of contemporary writers like Githa Hariharan. The article focuses on the enlightening opinions and excerpts of Hariharan shared with *The Wire*.

such as *Kathasaritsagara* and the buddhit *Jataka* tales; and the written and oral versions of the *Panchtantra* and the epic *Mahabharata*. (qtd in "The Unknown Corner – A Writer's Bank of Myths," 1+)

The Thousand Faces of Night is mainly based on three key women characters – Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook. These women characters of Hariharan narrate traumatic stories conditioned by the society's patriarchal pattern. They also portray the societal prospects and the unthinkable customs laid by the institution of patriarchy. Hariharan in the novel is quite selective and prefers to use the narrative technique i.e. 'Story within a story'. She demonstrates her stories using mythological references (myths) from the great epics of India like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. By considering the popular myths (*The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*), she wants to infuse a sense of responsibility and adherence in her female characters. As the mythical women figures emerge victorious after exercising their intellectuality and hardship, she states that her women can also achieve the same feat with the timely actions. She employs myths in her novel to symbolise the endless struggle of womanhood.

It is interesting to observe that her female characters such as Devi, Sita, Shahrzad, Dunyazad, Meena, Mala, and Sara experience severe disgust and revolt. They instigated a war against this gross discrimination and brutality as they realize that it is a common situation. Hariharan's woman characters seek to free themselves from this human bondage and escape to somewhere faraway. They with all their inner strength rebel against this sadistic approach of confinement. Her women are intellectual, honest and laborious.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a universal story representing married women who are not given their personal space to rejuvenate themselves. The writer makes use of myths to express her estimation of the turmoil and hardship of the portrayed three woman characters, who seeks to establish their self-assertion. Githa Hariharan highlights the stories from the Indian mythology *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* to analyze them from feministic perspective. The novel showcases how women's different roles as a daughter, wife and daughter-in-law are minimized. Devi, Sita and Mayamma perform justifiable roles of the Indian women. Hariharan's story depicts the women who have a thousand faces in their short journey to establish their real socio-identity.

Mayamma faces much subjugation and misery from the institution of patriarchy compared to all the women characters described in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. When she could not withstand the gross injustice inflicted upon her by her husband, mother-in-law and son she compromises her ideologies with to the institution of patriarchy. Like her alcoholic husband, her son also beats her regularly for trifle matters. Her suffering and hardships stretches for many years and after the death of her only son (a wastrel having fever), she releases all her suppressed pains and mental ennui by weeping to her heart's content:

The day her son dies, Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handiwork: now all these had been snatched from her . . . she found the horoscopes with all the signs of luck on it, whole and intact. She burnt it along with body of her son, and left the village by the first bus, next morning. (Hariharan 82)

Mayamma works as an elderly caretaker and cook of Devi's in-law's house. At a very tender age of twelve she marries a drunkard and gambler. Her husband does not care for her but only seeks regular sexual gratification from her. She could not enjoy her conjugal life. Mayamma resists herself from worldly desires and moulds herself as a dutiful wife, ideal daughter-in-law and responsible mother. Her mother-in-law could not read Mayamma's true feelings (inner mind) and pleases herself with the astrologer's prediction/assurance that Mayamma would bear her many strong grandsons. Her mother-in-law was watchful in anticipation of Mayamma getting pregnant soon, 'She watches Mayamma's slim waist intently for the first year and second year, she breaks into complaints' (Hariharan 80). Her mother-in-law never ceases to mentally torture her. She taunts Mayamma for her lack of interest in family activities/affairs. She compels Mayamma to acknowledge that women should endure pain and suffering:

I can see that you are still a child, she said. When I lost my first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear, I screamed, for the only time in my life, why? The oily, pockmarked village doctor, his hand still dripping with my blood, looked shitty. A woman must learn to bear pain, he mumbled. What can I do about the sins of your previous birth? But my mother-in-law was far more sure of herself. She slapped my checks hard, first this then the other. Her fists pummelled my breasts and still swollen stomach till they had to pull her off my cowering, bleeding body. She shouted, in a rage mixed with fear, do you need any more proof that this is not a woman? The barren witch has killed my grandson, and she lies there asking us why! Mayamma smiled toothless at me, as if the memory had lost someone of its bite". (Hariharan, Prelude)

Mayamma's mother-in-law even compels her to observe fast every alternate day and to truthfully pray to alter the '*dashas*' in her birth chart. Mayamma performed her difficult prayer and left nothing to complain. She regularly wakes early in the morning and completes all her spiritual activity with full devotion to satisfy the goddess. After much hardship and prayers she conceives a son:

Then the blood came soon and soon. No expense was spared, my husband wanted the new village doctor, not the midwife. He shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my

blood, my dying son. She is strong, she will bear many more children, he said. But after Raja was born two years later, I still groaned with pain. (Hariharan 122)

Mayamma is a sympathetic and sensitive who lets Devi to decide her own life in accordance to her personal decisions. When Devi decides to walk away from her husband Mahesh's life, she acknowledges it as a good step by her. Mayamma gave her blessing and was positive for her escape, "Go for my sake, for Parvatiamma who waited till only Kashi could be her escape" (Hariharan 118). Devi through her escape from her torturous husband's life seeks her identity that would give her a reputation in the society: "To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning" (Hariharan 139).

Hariharan's feministic analysis of the stories entwined with mythic elements can be projected as way of emphasizing women's individuality. The grandmother's generation (a generation symbolized by silence) is shown as a generation of Indian women who were supposed to be silent and dutiful. The grandmother vents out her suffocation by way of narrating the stories from a woman's point of view. She chooses stories to her preference where she can highlight feministic elements. In a roundabout way, she contradicts Baba's stories that are centered on the ideal conduct of women determined by patriarchy. Hence, Hariharan with ease showers her novel with mythical elements to justify and upgrade women's position in the progressive society.

Women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* feel suffocated by adhering to patriarchal norms and maxims. They deeply regret their decision of being compromising in every step. They even overlooked their inner soul for making their new family happy. These conscious/rebellious attitudes of the women are illustrated by V. Bhavani rightly:

All of them each in her own way have been both a victim and a survivor – their lives scarred by suffering, sacrifice, injustice and disappointment meted out by the patriarchal society. Yet in the end they emerged undefeated and strong by using their own survival strategies. (Bhavani 32)

Indian novels are primarily governed by patriarchal rules and regulations, but Hariharan introduces two versions of stories (feministic and patriarchal version) in the novel. The first version, i.e. the feministic version, is highlighted by Devi's grandmother's stories, and the second version, i.e. the patriarchal version, is depicted by Baba, Devi's father-in-law. Both grandmother and Baba are remarkable story-tellers. These two characters projects the common issues related to women through their own viewpoints and experiences. Grandmother acknowledges aggression and rebellious women, whereas, Baba believes in women sober and dutiful image:

His stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their center-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife. (Hariharan 51)

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan draws a thin line between the grandmother's stories and Baba's stories which are quite debatable for their implication. Baba's narrates stories that involve uncorrupted, righteous, self-sacrificing and submissive women characters. He shares Muthuswamy Dikshitar's story that shows a submissive woman (forsaking her own urges/desires for her husband's happiness). Hariharan's stories are stories crafted bigger than life canvas that speaks of women's dream and longing. The story of Jayadeva's wife Padmavati also depicts selfless women. Hariharan's stories are of women who are always prepared to make a difference/contribution in their husband's family.

The mythical tales are constructive in shaping the psyche of women. These mythical stories are remarkable for educating people about ethics and ideologies of life. It is seen in the novel that the grandmother tells stories for Devi's every question. But, the grandmother averts from revealing any personal experience or story from her own experience. Devi could clearly recollect the mythical stories told to her in childhood. The grandmother is knowledgeable who tells the story of Gandhari with a definite purpose. As she articulates: "Listen, listen and you will learn what it is to be a real woman" (Hariharan 28). The grandmother's stories have brought about a sense of protest/indifference in Devi: "Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities" (Hariharan 81). Right from her very childhood, Devi bundles rage and rebellious mindset: "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" (Hariharan 41).

After a thorough understanding of Grandmother's mythological stories, Devi's faith in Gods increases. She was innocent enough to believe that the fate of individuals can change easily if they are devoted to Gods. Hariharan symbolically depicts that the word 'Gods' can have two different meaning, i.e. one related to real heavenly Gods, and the other suggests the physical Gods (on earth) represented by male elders in the family. Devi elucidates her irritated mental picture of youth: "I listened to my grandmother's interpretation of Gandhari's choice, but the lesson I learn was different. The lesson brought me five steps closer to adulthood. I saw, for the first time, that my parents too were afflicted by a kind of blindness. In their blinkered world, they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another" (Hariharan 29). Similarly, the Indian society is influenced strongly by mythological values and education. In fact, their values and morals are forcefully introduced by the patriarchal society for their fellow women section.

Sita, another interesting woman character in the novel, leaves her passion to establish her priorities as a wife and a daughter-in-law. She leaves playing veena forever because she realized that she is disliked by her in-law family for devoting her leisure time at playing the veena. She feels enraged because she has performed all her household chores and was playing veena to revive herself. When her father-in-law yelled at her questioning, "Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law"? (Hariharan 30). She retorts, "Yes, I am a wife and daughter-in-law" (Hariharan 30). Sita's rude response to her father-in-law is as a consequence of constantly reminding her of her family priorities. She feels fed up with the monotonous lifestyle at her in-law family.

The Thousand Faces of Night can be considered as a reflection that indicates the thousand ways women are demoralized and exploited for serving man's ego. The night can be taken as a symbol of darkness supposed to be beautiful but it is projected in a negative shade in the novel. Women are exploited/subjugated for trivial issues since ages. In the novel, Hariharan (through women of different generations) displays how a woman is reduced in her domestic life. Sita is shown as confined to her domestic life. Mayamma and Devi's personality are negated. In fact, they are perceived as objects of reproduction. Uma's suffering also advocates the means as to how women can be dominated targeting their modesty.

The Thousand Faces of Night depicts the trials and problems of the three women who belong to different generations. Thus, the novel tries to arrest the reader's attention to these inexplicable injustice and exploitations of women who are subjected to their private sphere of life. It aptly discloses the tyranny and brutality that women experiences in her in-law's home. The writer is also concerned about the institution of marriage that resists women's liberty and growth. Sita's shabby treatment and hostility demonstrates how women are caged in their husband's house. Thus, Hariharan's is exemplary for her effort in bringing back the women's lost image and status.

The novel raises questions regarding the patriarchal attitude of reducing women's worth in their ability to reproduce. Mayamma and Devi's suffering clearly demonstrates how women are made to feel worthless because of their inability to reproduce. In the novel, there is also a reference to the sexual assault women are subjected to within their own homes. The writer tries to expose that women are viewed as commodities in the traditional society (to some extent prevalent even in modern society). This commodification of women is highlighted by Hariharan in a lucid manner: "Devi had again been packed and dispatched, this time to a more permanent destination" (Hariharan 107). Hariharan perceives life as a complicated sojourn and society as ever "evil, sorrowful and inequitable" (Campbell 104).

The stories of mythological heroines have influenced Hariharan so deeply that she has instilled her novel with their significance and experiences. Their stories involving mythological heroines' deeds and experiences are included by Hariharan basically for two purposes - (i) to

showcase the traditional/mythological women' adherence and obligation in an ideal society, (ii) and to portray that contemporary/modern women need to revolt against such practices and stand for themselves. She pictured Ganga and Gandhari as firm and livid in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Hariharan perceives Gandhari's role as a blindfolded mythological woman figure in different light. She believes that Gandhari wants to vent out her inner emotions/rage that she has suppressed since long. Hariharan highlights Ganga as an aggressive woman who disagrees with the traditional belief that the ultimate purpose of every woman is to perform the role of a good mother.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan emphasizes upon the role of mythology in the creation of women. She portrayed her characters that are from the sophisticated segment of society. Thus, their miseries have distinctly resulted from their subjugated gender position. They are subjugated in all fields of their life. Women characters such as Sita and Devi confront discrimination mainly due to their chained condition in gender hierarchy. Similarly, Mayamma who is a lower class woman is also exploited in the name of patriarchal discourse of motherhood. Hence, the writer points out that her women characters are not exploited because of their class but because of gender discrimination. Hariharan's women locate themselves amid customs and modernity and are reduced to sympathetic objects of gender prejudice of the society. Though, Devi is constantly educated to be a loyal wife through different means such as grandmother's mythical stories, stories shared by her father-in-law, Sita, Uma, Gauri and Mayamma, yet she rebels and chooses her own way brushing aside all the personal risks she may confront later. She, being willful, establishes the idea that women can also hunt for escape if they are bonded by patriarchal models. Hariharan through her novel claims that the contemporary time tests our endurance for hope and for sanguinity. She also feels that humans have to enrich their mental growth and resist cynical attitude towards life. Lastly, the novel persuades the readers to consider many critical questions especially related to women, whose answers/solutions are highlighted by the writer in the novel itself.

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