Reinterpretation of the Concept of Myth in Githa Hariharan’s Novel

*Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

India is an ancient country with rich cultural heritage and cultural values. The woman in India is respected as mother but at the same time she has been oppressed and denied recognition of her invisible work. The conventional roles of women as portrayed by many male and female writers of the past the expectations of the society have been changed and women have started representing themselves as real human beings with equal educational opportunities, emotions, responsibilities so on and so forth on par with men. Githa Hariharan in her novel *Thousand Faces of Night* explores Indian mythology and re-interprets it from the women’s perspective to find a universal remedy for gender relations. The technique of revision of myth is also an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women. Her interpretation of the traditional tales elevates the image of women and attempts to re-institute their position in the society that was downsized by men’s scriptures. The fabled myths and legends of India are reinterpreted with a young woman’s search for self. They make an attempt to explore the universal themes like freedom, independence and desire. The survival strategies of women of different generations and various social classes are presented. The theme of the novel proves that survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of women and every woman has to learn for herself. It also attempts to answer whether the Indian culture can indicate the rightful direction to the woman and the woman who is burdened with so many issues, is wise enough to choose the right path. This paper aims at exploring reinterpretation of the concept of myth in Githa Hariharan’s novel *Thousand Faces of Night*

Key words: confining code of patriarchy, quest for identity, revision of myth, survival strategies, resurrection of the image of women

Myths are considered as universal fables with a paradigmatic value in all situations. They are also an important aspect of literature and writers use them to present different cultural and social aspects. A myth signifies a story or plot, whether true or invented which records what people at different times, said or believed had happened. According to Northrop Fyre myth provides a structure to our imagination. Jungian psychology, too maintains that myths are ingrained in our consciousness.

Feminists believe that myth reflects the culture and ideology of patriarchy. It is a male conspiracy to subjugate women as the role of woman is depicted with the male perception. This kind of hegemony has pushed woman to obscurity and has forced her into silence. The stereotypical representations of women in myths limited the possibilities of women’s growth.

In twentieth century Indian women writers began to step out of these shadows and rewrote mythology written by men.
According to them the myths written by men have the function to infantilize women, so they have to be rewritten. The central aspect is the re-vision and re-interpretation of mythology from a female point of view. The main purpose of re-interpretation of myth is the resurrection of the status of women by demolishing, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered the image of women. This technique brings women to the center by shifting the perspective from the male to the female. Re-visionists attempt to give voice to the silenced women by re-imaging the characters or by re-interpreting the epics.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a common story of a woman whose marriage did not offer any happiness and the woman’s quest for identity. The theme of re-visiting of myths is used as an anchor in dramatizing the suffering and misfortunes in the lives of the three women, who struggles for self-assertion. All the stories that Devi, the protagonist was fed by her mentors helped her in emotional and intellectual development. Githa Hariharan has drawn these stories from the Indian mythology to view them from the female perspective. These myths are re-visioned, rewritten, and retold from a woman’s point of view. This technique made the novel a definite feminist writing in which the focus is on the inner lives of women and the vivid reflections of their inner spaces. Hariharan’s narrative drives its basic structure from the on-going contest between the male-centric mythos and dreamy realities of a woman, named Devi. The novel shows, how women are forced to play male-scripted subordinate roles through the lives of Devi the main protagonist, Sita and Mayamma, who present a picture of the multifaceted Indian woman.

It is clear that men made myths of Indian womanhood to support their own patriarchal ideals. Hariharan’s, story is a metaphor of multifaceted myth that unfolds the subdued women’s life. It depicts the woman that has a thousand faces as a perpetual captive in a closed frame of mythology scripted by men. The ancient mythical figures embellish the novel.

This plot of the novel, capture women of different generations and various social classes. The story revolves around these three main characters. Devi, an American returned contemporary woman comes to India with an American degree to face a demanding mother’s love, an unsuccessful marriage and an unsteady lover. The next character is her mother Sita, an ideal daughter-in-law, wife, mother and an ideal woman who tries to bridge the gulf between tradition and modernity. The last is Mayamma, the family retainer in Devi’s husband’s house, who learnt how to survive as the old family retainer, bending to the demands. Devi is not convinced by Mayamma’s pleading, that a marriage can be succeeded only if the woman agrees to endure endlessly without a murmur. But incessantly Devi is haunted through myth and memory of the women of the ancient times showing her the way either to stay or endure or to break free and move on.

Devi’s mother, Sita arranges a suitable marriage for her daughter. Her diligence made her daughter marry a practical minded sales manager, Mahesh. Devi’s relationship with Mahesh could not satisfy her emotional needs. Subsequently the boredom and emotional emptiness of her childless married life is temporarily relieved by the affinity she strikes with her father-in-law, Baba. Baba’s wife, Parvati left him to follow an ascetic life. He endeavours to guide Devi in the role of a good wife by affirming the cultural conventions embedded in his stories taken from Hindu scriptures. In his absence, Devi is then introduced to the bleak subaltern histories of real women, recounted by the aging family servant Mayamma. Haunted by these diverse stories of women, which are in fact bounded by common themes of endurance and violence, Devi is poised between a position of acceptance and resistance. However, she finds a brief solace, and fulfilment, in a love affair with the captivating and selfish musician, Gopal. The novel concludes with a positive note with Devi’s return to her widowed mother’s house to restart her life.
Gitsha Hariharan as a feminist writer attempts to showcase the way the protagonist tries to free herself from the so-called notions, taboos of the society and expectations of the scriptures. She tries to break her bond with the society and never wants to oblige to the expectations of the patriarchal world. She wants to free herself and takes the examples from the rebels of the mythology to establish her identity. She also takes models of women who revolted and rebelled against the social pattern of the chauvinistic society.

Hariharan displays in her novel the history of gender injustice in the community with process of net-working among women of different ages and generations and castes in the novel and is framed by numerous myths and real life stories. Devi rewrites these stories within her own life story, which is the basic frame of the entire plot. She observes, “the strategies of women’s survival, but her strategies later are different since every woman has to learn for herself, and survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of women.”

Hariharan weaves in multiple narratives of Devi, her mother Sita, and Mayamma. The story of Devi, who was in the process of becoming a woman on her own terms, was interacted with the narratives of Sita exemplifying perfect motherhood and Mayamma whose motherhood was socially a failure. So all the women, Devi, Sita, and Mayamma each of them to find a way to come to terms with life. How were these women directed to find their way?

Gitsha Hariharan explores in Indian mythology a universal remedy for these queries. Indian families have a plethora of relationships to safeguard the system of marriage. But when there is a familial problem, nobody supports the woman. A woman fights her battles alone. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, inquisitively tries to know the mystery of life. Her grandmother’s stories listened during the childhood attempt to provide answers to her curious questions. Devi learned the strategies of survival from the real and sordid stories of Mayamma, as endurance is the supreme ideal for women whose life is packed with struggles.

The fabled myths and legends of India are deftly inter-woven with a young woman’s search for self, exploring such universal themes as freedom, independence and desire. The novel attempts to answer whether the Indian culture can indicate the rightful direction to the woman and also is the woman, burdened with so many issues, wise enough to choose the right path.

Devi’s artistic vision is unleashed by the tutelage of her grandmother who narrates to her tales of mythical women connecting them with the sorrowful stories of real women around them. The stories which she heard every summer from the grandmother is a kind of preparation to her future life. They prepared the child towards her marriage where fortitude, patience, endurance and perseverance are inevitable. Those stories are allusions to gods, goddesses, superhuman warriors, brave princes, beautiful and virtuous princesses and men and women destined to lead heroic lives. For each problem, the grandmother indirectly narrates a story. The stories are solutions to the problems but they were not simple or ordinary bedtime stories. They had to be decoded.

She purposefully highlights the stories of the forgotten and invisible women of the past like Amba, Gandhari, Ganga and Damayanthi. Incidentally, great fury is hidden in all these women. Amba transformed her misfortune into an act of her triumph by avenging the offender Bhishma, who changed her fate. Ganga married king Santhanu after laying conditions and walked out of the marriage when terms of the marriage were not honoured. Damayanthi’s swayamvara with its grandeur showcased the independence of woman, as the princess could choose the man she loved even against the divine interference. Hariharan juxtaposes Devi’s memories of the stories with recollections of family histories to illustrate Pati’s reference to myth and legend to explain or rationalize particular
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events. Pati’s stories consist of heroes and heroines taken from the epics of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata in which princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending.

The stories were told for particular occasion to a particular character as Gauri’s domestic problems are yoked with a story of the beautiful girl who married a snake. Uma’s disastrous marriage was linked with how even Amba, a high born princess, becomes a victim of disaster. Amba transformed her fate, her hatred of Bheeshma, who was wronged her and denied her feminine fulfilment and glorious triumph.

Gandhari who was married to a blind king expressed her protest by taking an oath not to see the world thereafter, by binding her eyes with a band. Devi’s grandmother who narrated the story said that she embraced her destiny that is a blind husband with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. Devi learnt about life through her grandmother’s story of Gandhari and acclaimed that the lesson brought her five steps close to adulthood. She saw that her parents too were afflicted by a kind of blindness in their blinkered world but they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of other. This story of Gandhari, who sacrificed her sight to express her protest against her marriage with a blind man, connects to Sita, Devi’s mother, who had put aside veena to perform traditional duties of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She breaks her veena to idealize her role in a traditional Hindu home and her breaking of the veena can be seen as a revolt and a protest against male dominance. But later she is able to break free from the past and take control of her life. Then she not only resumes her love for veena but also shows courage and individuality. These stories make Devi feel that she ought to do something as a mark of protest worthy of the heroines she grew up with. Devi rejoices in imagining as Durga or Kali and ready to avenge the assault in her inner core.

Mayamma, the old caretaker at Mahesh’s house, is another victim of patriarchy, who lived all her life trying to satisfy others. Married at the age of twelve to a useless gambler, she had no happiness in marriage. When two years of marriage brought forth no child she incurred the wrath of her mother-in-law and husband. She did every penance to change her course of life till she finally gave birth to a male child. Mayamma’s son a wastrel from birth being a replica of his father even never hesitates to beat the mother. Mayamma lost him as he caught fever and died. Having lost everything Mayamma left home for good and came to Mahesh’s house to attend the family needs. Through the life of Mayamma, Githa Hariharan shows the innate strength of women who are able to bounce back to normalcy despite of great ordeals in life. Inspite of her difficult and painful life she was able to be a bed-rock to Mahesh’s family and always gave immense strength and support to the family.

The patriarchal social system has laid down the ways of expressing womanhood. A woman should live as daughter, wife and mother. Devi’s father-in-law, Baba was a typical illustration of a male-dominated patriarchal world. His stories represented the codes laid down by Manu which clearly spoke of the virtuous and chaste women who inspired their husbands along the path of Dharma by their sacrificial nature, self-abnegation and subservience.
Baba’s stories were different from Grandmother’s stories they were less spectacular. Whereas grandmother’s stories were a prelude to her womanhood and an initiation into its hidden possibilities, Baba’s stories define the limits and its center-point “an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife.” (51). As a married young lady, Devi found that myth was not mere a wonderful story, but a veritable aspect of life. Baba’s stories always insist that women should be devoted to their husbands. In his opinion women would reach heaven by serving their husband with devotion and care. Baba’s criteria for a good housewife is that she should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wears and restrained in expenses, controlled in mind, word, and body and obedient. These are the rules laid by men for the smooth governance of the house.

Baba gives out philosophical notes from Manu. He believed that where women are honoured, there the gods delight. Baba says that women had always been instruments of the saint’s initiation to bhakthi. He recites the story of Jeyadeva who sang Gita Govinda, to say how a great man can see the spiritual greatness of his wife. Baba alludes to the story of Purandara Das who became miserly as his fortune grew. And how he was humbled and led an austere life after learning the true spirituality from his wife. Baba’s another story of Narayana Tirtha, talks about how a virtuous wife devoted to her husband died before him, as a sumangali.

Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of their husbands or children and felt safe in their confinement. This very confinement has made them slaves. They are the victims in the hands of patriarchal structure. Githa Hariharan’s women characters are trapped between tradition and modernity and have become the victims of gross gender discrimination of the male dominated society. Baba’s stories highlight the way a housewife should live limiting her identity to the domestic work and according to him only the women those who are controlled in mind, word and body reach heaven.

Githa Hariharan’s Devi, in spite of the continuous exposure to the mythical stories told by her grandmother from childhood, the stories she hears from the father-in-law and the real stories of Sita, Uma, Gauri and Mayamma do not help her to be a submissive wife to Mahesh. She viewed myth-dictated society with hostility and defiance of a woman warrior. She 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). As her mother-in-law revolted by leaving the family in search of God, Devi’s elopement with Gopal is also a revolt against her husband, Mahesh, who merely wants her to keep waiting, as a submissive wife for his arrival. To break the monotony, the loneliness and the meaninglessness of life finally, in a fit to give vent to her lone life to put an end to the “yawning emptiness” (68), she chooses to elope with Gopal. She hopes to find solace in the company of Gopal but in vain. So, the hankering for love ends and she goes alone in search of her identity.

She is very sure that her mother can understand her transformation and her desire to re-start her life from the very beginning. It is an attempt to establish that women are no more entities of someone else, but have their own mission of seeking their salvation. Devi’s ultimate endorsement of her autonomy is celebration of that of the entire community of women.

Subversion and parody have been used in feminist re-writing of the old texts. But in Hariharan’s work, the old stories undergo subtle and gradual transmutations through narration as they pass from one generation to another. This novel nurtures serious feminist discourse where propaganda is shunned in favour of an honest and realistic portrayal of life. Survival is shown as pre-condition to any futuristic struggle. Devi, the protagonist resists the hegemony of the patriarchal, but never endangers her survival by adopting fundamentalist feminist position in finding a path to success.
Devi searches for self by exploring universal themes as freedom, independence and desire. This study explores solutions to the questions whether a woman can find her true path within Indian culture. The possibility for woman to choose her own path with the burden of many issues like, family values, related expectations towards her like her own modesty, pride of the family in the society and responsibility to guide her offspring.

_Thousand Faces of Night_ also incites the reader to ponder over many questions. Such as, what makes a dutiful daughter, wife, and mother and what makes a good Indian woman? Solutions to these questions can be found in this novel with the reflections of the underworld of Indian women's lives that the story brings alive.

**Works Cited**


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