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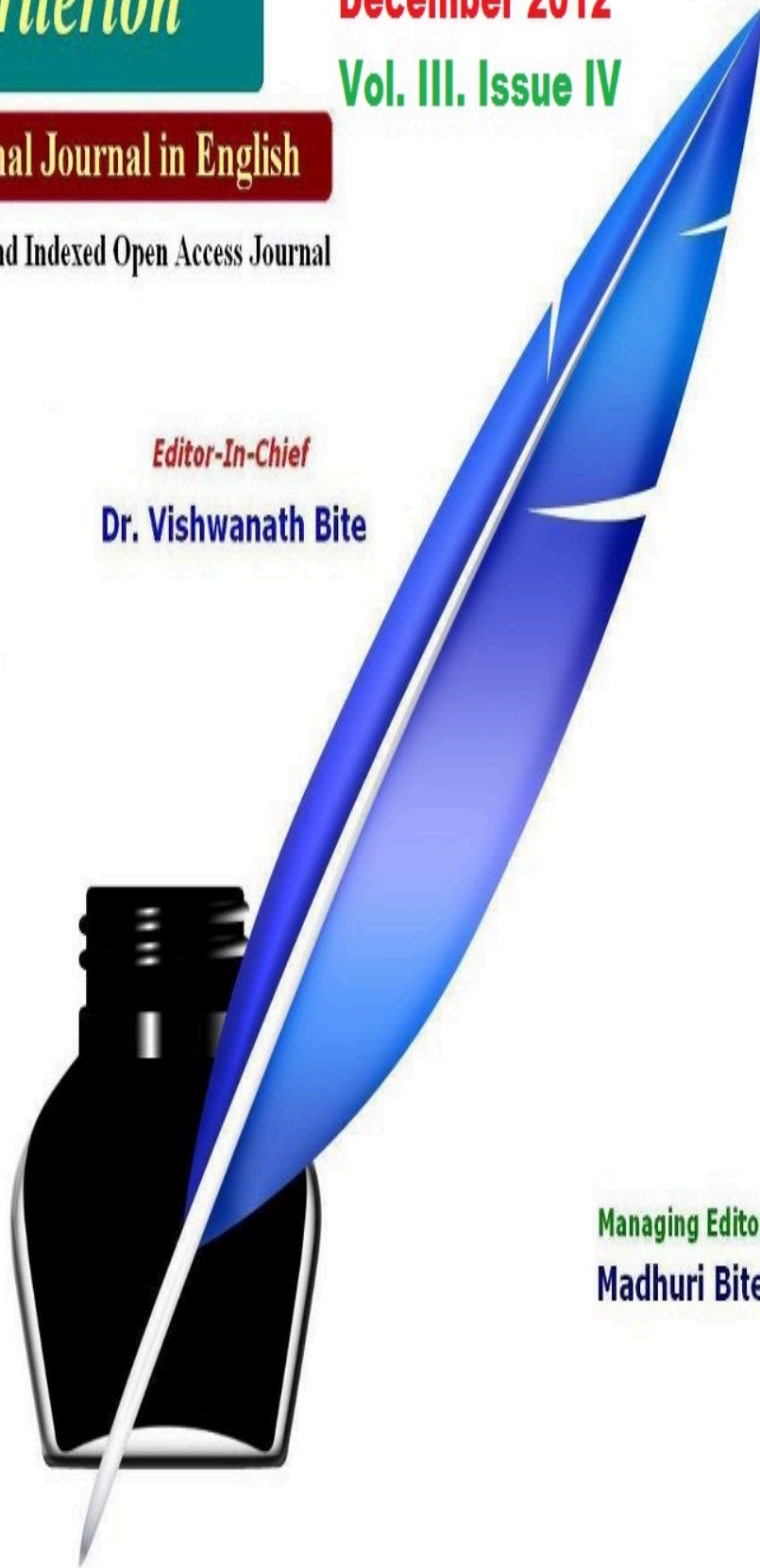
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## Hindu Culture and Way of Life Focused by Githa Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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India is a country with rich and varied cultural heritage, where Hindu Dharma is given pride of place. Sanatan Dhrama or Hindu Dharma is not a religion but a way of life. Any piece of literature which has been produced on this sacred land will certainly have some influence of the Vedas, the Puranas, the Epics, and the Upanishads. The works of Githa Hariharan, a writer particularly concerned with women's issues, are no exception. In her first novel "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" she has not only used myths to understand the lives of women but also focused on certain features of Hindu culture which predominantly influence the life of a common man. The paper aims to highlight how the Hindu way of life has been depicted by Hariharan through mythical characters, holy personalities and the concepts of culture and tradition in the novel.

Githa Hariharan, in her award winner novel, "*The Thousand Faces of Night*", eloquently presents the Hindu way of life through characters in the novel like the grandmother of Devi and Devi's father-in-law, a Sanskrit Professor. They are two mouth pieces of the author to make Devi aware of certain oriental concepts which are part of life for Hindus or so-called Indians for ages. The grandmother tells stories from Hindu epics –the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, etc in which the characters have all time significance; whereas the Professor of Sanskrit derives and tells anecdotes and tales from all Sanskrit, Vedic literature to educate his daughter-in-law in tradition, culture and customs.

### **Swayamvara**

There were many instances of swayamvaras in Hindu mythology. In the Ramayana, Rama attends the swayamvara of Sita and wins her heart by breaking the mighty bow of lord Shiva. In Mahabharata also, Arjuna wins Draupadi in a swayamvara; Bheesma also gets the three brides -Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his step brother in swayamvara by beating all other aspiring princes. The one instance discussed in the novel is the swayamvara of Damayanthi.

When Devi's mother prepares her for swayamvara, with eligible boys, Devi recollects the story of Damayanthi's swayamvara which she had listened to in the lap of her grandmother at the age of six. The grandmother depicts every detail of the event in a dramatic way. Many a time Devi interrupts her with innocent questions for which grandmother gives eloquent replies. The descriptions of kings, the theatre, the gods and princes of many other countries who attended swayamvara and then the princess, the garland she carries, the bridal make up are very impressive on the young mind of Devi. In the story, Damayanthi is quite sure of her destination i.e. Nala, the prince of Nishadas. She could identify her beloved Nala despite the confusion created by gods and offers the garland to him.

The grandmother's words in this context are thought-provoking to Devi when she says, "Everything about a bride is a secret" (Hariharan 19) Grandmother's stories are no ordinary bed-time stories. She chooses each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of the childish questions raised by Devi. From this story, it is evident that in ancient times woman was given enough freedom to choose her husband. Though it might not be prevalent in all communities, it can be far more advanced practice in the institution of marriage when compared to the present day conditions. In this context, Devi is also given enough freedom in choosing her husband. She has attended two swayamvaras with other guys and finally she marries Mahesh.

### **Institution of Marriage**

The institution of marriage is an item discussed at length in this novel. Githa Hariharan details, at various contexts in the novel : the concept of Indian traditional marriage, swayamvara, preparations for marriage, the wedded life, the new bride's duties at in-law's house, the mother-in-law's treatment, wife and husband relations, the difference of opinions between wife and husband and their implied consequences.

In Indian society, marriage is a sacred institution. Getting married and begetting children is a religious duty to be performed by every individual to keep up one's dynasty forever. So in ancient days, they used to have swayamvara in which the bride is given choice to choose her own life partner. Even the unique concept of Sita-Rama kalyanam is presented in a different way by Githa Hariharan. Mayamma when recollecting her moments with ParvathiAmma, she remembers the day they had together gone to a movie and had watched Sita's swayamvara. When Rama had lifted the bow and bent it, it cracked and fell to the ground with a resounding thud. They were both deeply immersed in the movie. the story of the movie is not an ordinary story; it is the story that is being taught, heard, and read for many yugas in this land. Even today, after thousands of years, people still revere Ramayana and long to see and perform the Sita-Rama kalyanam annually to offer their symbolic respect to the 'ideal couple' of ancient India.

### **Shodasa Samskaras**

In Hindu society, that too in a traditional Brahmin family, they have a long-established way of upbringing a child. It is said that 16 Samskaras are there for a person to live a perfect life. They are called Shodasa Samskaras which run from birth to death of an individual. These are actually postulated by great sages of this land and are passing from one generation to the other without any break for the common good of the society. Githa Hariharan describes some of them through the character of Mayamma.

When Mayamma, brooding over her own life in Mahesh's house alone after everybody's departure, recollects her son's Upanayanam, held at the age of eight. She had taken her son to the most pious man in their village teacher (guru). Her son Raja, shaven headed, freshly bathed, legs wrapped in a cloth newly dyed with red chalk, waist girdle of sacred grass and strip of deer's skin, a staff in hands stood before his guru. Then the guru gave him a cup of water and asked him to look at the sun, all the while repeating the Gayatri Mantram, which the guru recited. He then stood before his mother, his hands folded in supplication, begged for his first alms. She showered his hand with heaps of rice and jaggery. This custom is called Upanayanam, one of the sixteen samskaras. This samskara allows one to become Brahmin. An individual wears the sacred thread

‘upaveetam’ with ‘Gayatri mantropdesam’ and takes a new birth as a Brahmin and thus becomes a ‘Dwija’ who is very much qualified to perform all Vedic rituals.

### **Motherhood**

Emphasizing motherhood and its importance, grandmother takes Devi to Mahabharata. She narrates the story of king Shantanu and Ganga. Devi understands the significance of the story well. The grandmother said “...to be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to earn the title, just as you have to renew your wifely vows everyday” (Hariharan 89). Mayamma was also given blessings of a priest at the time of her marriage “.... Large hearted Indra! Shower on this young bride brave sons and good fortune; give her ten sons; and make her husband the eleventh”. (Hariharan 79)

Unfortunately, Mayamma was not blessed with even a single child for ten years. To attain motherhood, she also adopted penance and tried in every way because, a woman without child, say the sages, goes to hell. “She woke up at four in the morning, and walked among the blue-tipped shadows to the pond. She prayed, made vows, and dipped herself again and again, in the pure coldness. She starved every other day; she gave up salt and tamarind. She tied little wicker baskets with crimson strips of cloth on the tree dedicated to Jaganmatha. She meditated for hours before a pan of clear water, representative of the golden complexioned Shasti, giver of children..... She invoked every day the goddess thousand names..... with the richest gifts she could lay her hands on”. (Hariharan 80).

Ten years of her penance bore fruit for her when she was blessed with a son on an auspicious day, Diwali. The respect that one derives for having a child and the honour she loses for not having one is explained well through Mayamma in the novel. The tradition respects a mother more than a childless woman. As per the ancient belief, those who do not have a son will have their soul’s destination in ‘hell’, and not ‘heaven’.

### **Penance**

Penance, in its myriad forms, especially in the context of Indian women has been demonstrated in this novel. The anger against patriarchal society, hostility against oneself is best personified in the mythical character Gandhari of Mahabharata. As soon as she realizes that her husband is a blind man, in her pride, in her anger, without uttering a word, she tore off a piece of cloth and tied it tightly over her eyes. Gandhari is the best example to exhibit self sacrifice and penance. In similar lines, Devi’s mother Sita, only to prove herself as dutiful daughter-in-law, renounces her Veena. One can assess Sita’s choice of opting penance; from her brooding: “...the central motive of years of blind suffering was no piece of fiction. Gandhari’s anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold burnt in a heart close, very close to mine”(Hariharan 29)

Amba, another figure of Mahabharata, resorts to penance, when Bheesma refuses to marry her. With a burning desire to take revenge on Bheesma, she goes to the forest and performs penance. This penance persists till she gets victory over Bheesma in the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

The notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women victims in the novel. Devi's mother-in-law, ParvatiAmma, in pursuit of god, had walked out of her house without informing anyone; Mayamma's sincere efforts to be blessed with a child at her in-law's house; the fate of Gauri, the servant maid; and the short lived marital life of Uma, are all instances we confront in the novel. K. Damodar Rao analyses the penance in Devi's life as: "Devi's penance takes multiple forms of response from self pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. she feels suffocated in the atmosphere and plans definite means of escape....Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba and suffers like snake woman"(Dhawan 165)

Hariharan wonderfully presents the effect of stories told by the grandmother about mythical characters on the life of Devi. When doctors advise fertility course to Devi to attain motherhood, Mayamma, on the other hand, advises her to practice penance, as Mayamma's mother-in-law advised her to do penance when she was child-less. "... She invited penance as an old friend" (Hariharan 80). Having realized the qualities of the mythical women in the stories of her grandmother, and the live stories of other women in her life, and her self-realization of helplessness, Devi tries all possible means of revenge against her humiliating husband. She feels: 'I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act –humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of heroines I grew up with' (Hariharan 104)

### **Hindu way of living**

Baba, Father-in-law of Devi, a Sanskrit professor; explains the Hindu way of living. Once he explains one of the famous kritis of Thyagaraja "...nidhi chala sukhama, sannidhi seva sukhama" (Hariharan 69) to his daughter-in-law. The real joy comes from a vision of god rather than the wealth of men. People always strive for the service of god and even a great bhakta like Thyagaraja had to struggle with his mind because it had to be pulled away from transient pleasures.

Baba also says 'Brahma vat Apnoti param' which means the only knower of Brahmin obtains Brahmin. In this struggle of reaching god, they become close to Him. They see him always ... 'Sada pasyathi soorayah' (Hariharan 69). This philosophy of life or Vedantic concept of life is well explained by Baba. Baba tells many unambiguous stories without any fantasy. He always feels that the saints lived according to the time tested tradition.

He tells the story of Muthuswamy Dikshitar in this context. Dikshitar had two wives. The first wife was a good woman but was of dark complexion. So, his parents found a beautiful and fair complexioned girl for the young Bhakta and he accepted her. Accompanied by his two young wives, and went to Benares. Years later, the fair one expressed her desire for jewels to match her beauty. Some of his disciples suggested an audience with Maharaja of Tanjavur, a patron of arts. Then he looked at his wife's body, covered in a coarse, hand-woven sari and then sang in the raga of Lalitha. "Hiranyaim Lakshim sada bhajami" (When I have with me the golden lakshmi, what do I care for unworthy mortals?)(Hariharan 52). The same night goddess of Ambika in her glittering jewellery blessed the fair wife in her dreams. She was satiated by the divine beauty and forgot her desire for ornaments.

Through the examples cited in the novel, Hariharan explains how simple living and holy life used to be preferred to rich, wealthy, aristocratic life in our country. The saints and sages who renounced everything and lived for society and its well-being were always honoured by the then great emperors.

### Women in our tradition

Baba, a voice of Manu, tells Devi many stories of Saints and their wives who uphold the traditional concept of Hindu Dharma. He speaks of the path of a woman should follow on this earth so as to reach the heaven. He says: "...woman has no independent sacrifice to perform. Not by sacrifices, vows, fasting but only by serving her husband she (a chaste wife) reaches heaven." (Hariharan 55) Through Baba's words Hariharan quotes the traditional way of living and the duties of a house wife. "...the house wife should always be joyous adept in domestic work.....even as her lord does.'(Hariharan 70) Mayamma was married at the age of twelve and the priest's blessings on the day of marriage are to be noted in this context. "Flourish, without fierce looks and without harming your husband; be good to animals, amiable to everything else; be the mother of heroes, be devoted to the gods and the bringer of happiness. Large hearted Indra! Shower on this young bride brave sons and good fortune; give her ten sons; and make her husband the eleventh". (Hariharan 79)

Here the priest tells a bride how to lead a married life as a woman. Every word of the priest is noteworthy and they tell the expected behaviour of a wife at her in-law's house. If she behaves well, treats her husband like her son, the institution of marriage will be strengthened. According to Hindu mythology, a virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him. So Indian women prefer death with vermilion their forehead and arms and neck ornamented with bangles and gold chains. Githa Hariharan has given instances from the lives of wives of Syama Sastry and Thyagaraja in this context. "Great men earn, through their spiritual power, the fortune of a virtuous wife. The saintly Syama Sastry's wife died five days before he died. Thyagaraja's second wife made even more certain of her passport to virtuous wifehood. The day she was to die, she held a sumangali prarthana; twelve married women sat down to a sumptuous feast she had cooked with her own hands. At the end of the feast, Thyagaraja's wife presented each of them with the tokens of their status.—six glass bangles, green for fertility, kumkum, turmeric, two betel leaves and betel nuts, a little mirror, a comb, and a small sandle wood box full of red kumkum that was mixed with gold dust. Equipped with the women's blessings, she streaked her fore head and the parting of her hair with a glorious, luminous red; then laid down gracefully, a whole, fulfilled woman, and died. (Hariharan 67)

At one juncture of the novel, Githa Hariharan employs Baba to explain the greatness of women. She quotes *Manusmrithi*, and puts the translation of the following sloka: 'Yatra naryanthu pujanthe, ramanthe tatra devatah- Yatraitastu na pujanya sarvahstare aphaltah kriyah'. "Fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-laws should honour brides if they desire welfare. Where women are not honoured; there all acts become fruitless."(Hariharan 65) This is an exquisite occasion which proves the ultimate importance is given to women in ancient days in this country. This also leads to some hypothesis that prior to ever-criticized Patriarchal society; we had a matriarchal society where women are given more prominence than men. She strongly believes that women have always been the instruments of the saints' initiation into

Bhakti. Githa Hariharan takes examples from the lives of JayaDeva, Purandara Dasa, Narayana Teerdha, Syama Sastry and Thyagaraja.

While composing *Gita Govindam* once Jaya Deva wrote: ‘Smara garala khandanam mama sirasi mundanam dehi pada pallava mudram...’ which means –Oh Radha-the poison of love has rushed up to my head. Only your tender rose coloured feet on my head will chase the poison down my body. (Hariharan 65) Having come out of his devotional trance, Jaya Deva read these lines and shuddered at the meaning. Then he crossed out those lines and went for an oil bath in the back yard. Then Krishna came to Padmavathi, the wife of Jaya Deva, in her husband’s guise and restored the lines in the manuscript. Later, when Jaya Deva saw this miracle, he fell at the feet of his wife. She had had the fortune of seeing Krishna, a blessing he had been denied for a long time.

Githa Hariharan makes an apt comment in this context: “A great man can see the spiritual greatness of his wife” (Hariharan 65). This asserts the truth that women are instrumental in the spiritual elevation of an individual, aggrandizement of a family and over-all development of society. It is illustrated well through the following examples.

Purandara Dasa, the saint and great composer of Karnatic music, was a rich business man. He became a miser, as his fortune increased. One day a Brahmin came to him for some financial help to conduct the ceremony of Upanayanam for his son. But Dasa did not give anything to him. In great disappointment, he went to Dasa’s wife Saraswathibai with the same petition. Without a second thought; she gave her nose ring to the Brahmin. Later, he went to Dasa’s shop to sell the ring. Dasa was surprised to see his wife’s nose ring and sent a messenger home to bring his wife’s nose ring. Saraswathi Bai fainted as soon as she heard the messenger. When she recovered her senses, took a cup of poisonous potion. As she took the potion in to her hands, it disappeared and instead she saw the replica of her nose ring. When Dasa came to know all this, he gave away his property and decided to lead a simple and austere life.

In another instance, Narayana Teerdha, believed to be another incarnation of Jaya Deva, was swimming across the stream to visit the house of his father-in-law. Suddenly a current swept him into deep waters. To save himself from the danger he threw away his sacred thread, plucked a hair of his head and recited a mantra that would make him a sanyasi. Surprisingly, the current subsided and he reached the shore alive. Then the real dilemma started...to be a sanyasi or to go to his wife? Then his ideal wife saw him and rightly understood the storm running in his mind. She marked her forehead with the dust of his feet and went back to her parents. Inspired by his wife’s devotion Narayana Teerdha was initiated to Sanyasa.

Though Githa Hariharan labeled herself as a feminist, reformist, revisionist, human rights activist, postmodern writer, she has given all issues related to religion, culture, and tradition of this land in detail. It is a manifestation of her study made in depth. The novel is very much helpful to not only western people but also some Hindus who are not aware of their culture and feel that theirs’ is inferior to that of others.

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