

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Socio-Cultural Consciousness in the Female Protagonists of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Madhvi Gangahar
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
H.P. University,
Shimla-171 005 (H.P.)

The increasing rate of suicides in the modern progressive society has given a tremendous shock to all the life loving people as it indicates the estranging sociological and psychological conditions prevailing in the society. Every individual is participating in a cross country race swirling in the ground that reaches nowhere. The lack of emotional security and alienation in the modern progressive society other than other factors such as economic conditions, career stress etc. is the major cause for it. The present system has disintegrated the centuries old social and psychological bonding compelling everyone to look for a hiatus. In the past, one facing nostalgia or depression was given psychological solace by the near and dear ones but the present life has been taking this world to a point where all are living in isolation. In the moments of depression and stress, there is no one to take the other out of the deep cracks of psychological disorder resulting in escalating cases of suicides. In the case of women, the problems get more complicated due to their subaltern position in the patriarchal society.

In the world of literature, the characters are drawn from the reality. An author paints in his or her works what he or she perceives from the real world and tries to offer the solutions or alternatives in his or her own unique way. Githa Hariharan is one of the major writers who offers alternatives to make the reader think about the circumstances in the society. She is a progressive writer who does not sever her ties from the society. Her works simultaneously reveal the tapestry of patriarchy and at the same time attempt to celebrate feminine selfhood and freedom. Whenever a woman tries to change the prevalent social conditions, she is restricted at different levels. The Phallogocentric world keeps the women in darkness and does not allow them to experience a new life. The self abnegation leads to sorrow. Sometimes they find themselves in a situation where it is not possible for them to express their anger to those who hurt them. They suppress their dreams and also show dislike for themselves for finding themselves in a situation where they cannot react. A reader can easily assess the tensions between the individual desires and social expectations faced by these women. The oscillation between the individual will and the expectations of the society contains the possibility of initiating a change. The way Hariharan probes the social conditioning in *The Thousand Faces of the Night* is worth noticing. Hariharan explores the inner world of the women who are striving towards self-realization. By choosing female protagonists and exploring their inner world, female writers like Hariharan consciously portray those unique features of woman's psyche which remain hidden from the world outside. In this regard Dr. S. Prasanna Sree writes:

Through this medium of expressing themselves in writing, women have investigated and published those aspects of their lives as sexual beings that have not previously been acknowledged by society. Despite late 21st century, women are still very far from

attaining the required level of Socio-cultural, educational and economic advantages usually enjoyed by men. (39)

Hariharan deconstructs the common sense notions in myths and proposes rethinking. The common sense notions support patriarchal order and construct an identity of ideal womanhood in the light of dominant male culture. She throws the light on these notions and reveals these to be man-made constructs. Hariharan dexterously interweaves the myths in the novel and the lives unfolding around which do not always rise to the heroic proportions mentioned in the myths and stories. Chaman Nahal in this context writes:

I would like to examine whether we have a replacement model in feminine fiction. It is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myths—the conditioning myths with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct replacement models. We all revere Sita and Savitri; they did something out of loyalty, out of dedication. We may not like it today, but can we disown them? We cannot escape the myths. So, the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have. (18)

Devi, the daughter of Sita, grows up among the stories and myths narrated to her by her grandmother. Both psyche and politics play an important role during her development. As a curious child Devi queries about the conditions of the women around her. Grandmother always makes her understand her inquiries through story telling. These stories are decoded and a moral is always drawn out. So in her very childhood, Devi is socially conditioned to achieve the idea of ideal womanhood. These myths constitute the fabric of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The story telling reveals the pedagogic discourses that frame the patriarchal social set-up. They contribute to promote dominant patriarchal ideology. As a child, Devi questions the myths provoking simple questions like: Is there no way out to change the situation? It illustrates how curious she is to know the facts and also keen to change the established order. Here one traces the imprint of Hariharan's 'undefined yearning' which the writer has since her childhood in Devi. She is keen to know the reality. Sometimes to verbalize the emotions, articulate the views, and asking questions, howsoever contrary to those of others around, become extremely important. Silence is not always golden. Even if the other components of society do not support a girl, she can take the step to break the silence herself to know the answers to her questions.

Devi's curious mind reveals indirectly that the myths and the epics need to be reviewed and reinterpreted from the humanist point of view. Instead of being completely conditioned by the cultural influence she tries to find the way out. As she grows older she begins to see that the problem lies in finding the suitability of ideal mythical characters in the contemporary society. While commenting on such situations, Devi once speaks thus:

“I must have, as I grew older, begun to see the fine cracks in the bridge my grandmother built between the stories I loved, and the less self-contained, more sordid stories I saw unfolding around me. The cracks I now see are no longer fine; they gape as if the glue that held them together was counterfeit in the first place. But the gap I now see is also a debt: I have to repair it to vindicate my beloved storyteller” (30-31)

The sordid stories that Devi finds unfolding around her makes her muse over the reality of existence and the garb of deceit over it. Whether women resist or accept, these factors

determine their destiny. In spite of different social classes, the plight of women is the same. She goes to America to get a degree. Though geographically she is in America but in reality her mind and spirit belongs to India. The pull of her mother to return to Madras is so strong that she faces the dilemma whether stay or return to her home. The return to the womb that keeps one rooted firmly to the ground or to remain dreamy and roam the beyond is a big question for Devi. The decision that she takes to return, is due to the instinctive compulsions. Her mother, Sita, starts preparations for her marriage. After meeting the six prospective bridegrooms, the horoscopes of Mahesh and Devi assure Sita of their being prospective happy couple. However it proves wrong later on. Neither Devi nor Mahesh has any interest in making the marriage work. Her relationship with her husband is marked by loneliness, silence and discontent. Mahesh is more of a businessman than an ideal husband. Lack of communication stifles and chokes her voice and disintegrates her sensibility. Later in the novel, Devi is fascinated by an Indian singer Gopal for his sincerity and devotion to work. She elopes with Gopal in order to take revenge from Mahesh. Rama Kundu remarks: It is less for love than to show her rage of rejection of a demeaning marriage that had crushed dignity, individual aspiration and mocked her emotional imaginative refinement.(120) With Gopal, she again gradually develops the same sense of void as he does not recognize her individuality. Devi is yet to reach her destination and carve out a niche for herself. Once again she protests and craves for survival on her own. Therefore, in the end she realizes that she has enough of drifting between the worlds like a floating island searching for props. She seeks to find her own authentic 'self' and secure some firm holding of the mainland. She goes back to her mother in search of her roots. She passes through variegated relations till she establishes a contact with her real self and takes a step to attain equipoise.

The role played by society imposing the virtues epitomizing the ideal womanhood can clearly be seen in the character of Sita. Society allows enough freedom to men to develop their self whereas women have to struggle at different stages while also bearing the responsibilities. They face difficulties at different emotional and physical levels. This social conditioning creates hurdles in self-development. Her life is controlled by some other entity, the social system. In her childhood, Sita, the mother of Devi, has the ambition to become a veena player. With efforts she achieves her aim. Though she is not beautiful, yet she makes up by excelling in music and other domestic chores. After marriage she finds herself in a different world where different duties are expected from her as a daughter-in-law. Once when she gets rebuked from her father-in-law that she is not an ideal daughter-in-law, she pulls out the strings of veena in order to achieve that so-called ideal womanhood. She suppresses her desire and devotes all her time and energy to save the family's prestige and honour with "order, reason, progress" (26).

Through Mayamma, The old family retainer of Devi's in-laws, Hariharan exposes the helplessness of traditionally suppressed rather illiterate woman. She becomes the target of social norms. Her disarming passivity makes her suffer patiently for quite a long period. After bearing the cruelty of her husband and mother-in-law, she tries to infuse meaning into the life of her son only to acknowledge the fact that her son is the xerox copy of her husband. The suppressed anger and sufferings of her heart comes in the form of tears on the day her son died. She wept from the core of her heart remembering her youth and her past.

Whether a woman is educated or illiterate, one fact is common to almost all the societies is that woman has never been considered equal to man. She has always been treated as property of man. A number of Indian novels focus on the problems of women. Often the novels end up

glorifying the tradition of virtues of Indian woman. This novel deals with the problem differently because of its social and cultural concerns. Hariharan deals with all kinds of characters, be it uneducated Mayamma, the self-controlled Sita or the educated Devi. Mayamma finds consolation in the stoic acceptance of destiny. Sita slaughters her desires for the family. Devi avenges herself in multiple ways. Thus it is amply clear that female characters in this novel get themselves hurt in order to show that they have been wronged. These are the compulsions made by the temporarily-acquired instincts which result in self-inflicted injury. It is only the crisis of identity which is the root of all problems in human life. All the psychological or the existential is deeply rooted in social.

If Devi tries to take a flight from the stress situation and swims against the current, she has the ability to realize that life is worth to be lived. She knows the importance of: “lush in spite of its sand-choked roots” (139). In this regard, she presents a picture of new, modern woman. She decides: “To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning” (139). On the other hand Sita, after killing her ambition, opts to flow with the current but soon realizes the futility of her existence. The yearning to revive her spirits, after getting the experience of Devi in her life, swirls to achieve its aim. She revitalizes the cadaver of her desires and dusts veena to make a fresh start.

Hariharan captures the social and cultural disfiguration of the society and makes the reader think that one has to change one’s point of view to look at things so that the challenges of the society can be faced effectively. In a society that is becoming increasingly progressive, the conflict between our traditional values and new found mores hurts no one else more than the fair sex. The age old mindset inherited from culture sometimes interferes but a fair judgment leads to successful opening of the new vistas.

Life keeps on rolling till one does not stop at a particular point in one’s life and tries to look back into the mirror of incidents and memories or tries to evaluate the gains and losses of one’s birth. The concept of self-realization, as is quoted in the Indian scriptures while on the path of spiritual journey, occurs once in a thousand years in the case of great saints. In general terms the concept of self-realization helps the individual to look back in one’s life to evaluate it and after continuous analysis one can see the threads of one’s cobwebs where the pattern has gone wrong. The present novel of Githa Hariharan is replete with such characters. Both Sita and her daughter Devi are brought up in different environments, times and backgrounds. While one was quite away from the much spoken concept of globalization and mass-communication revolution and the other got an opportunity to have acquaintances and passed a significant period of her life in America. Sita’s life was full of odds which she mastered with her intelligence and dexterity. Devi, who spends a couple of years in America, enjoyed all kind of freedom. She could not adjust herself thoroughly to a traditional life as she had been influenced by the modernistic ideas of the west. She tries to accept those ideas only out of maternal love. At a crucial point in her life, she is also forced by her instinctive compulsions to ponder over all the happenings and the incidents happened in her life. All of a sudden she realizes that there was no charm in life she is leading and gets back to her mother. Her mother, who also faces the same dilemma, welcomes her with open hands. Devi full of disappointment, expectation and apprehension, opens the gate of her home in Madras, feels happy to hear the music of playing veena which her mother shelved about two decades back. With melodies in the air, Devi also notices a wild growth of the plants in the compound which her mother used to take care of, prune them timely. In her aim to achieve

perfection in everything, Sita realizes that she has lost her way. The chains of society are willingly welcomed by her under the influence of culture but this was also crushing her own desires. As one awakens, the self-realization starts budding and blooming. She realizes that the strict discipline that she imposed on Devi and plants, could not mould them. They exhibit their true nature whenever they are at liberty. This liberty brings one to the threshold of change. Devi has her own changed notions of life. The mingling and the transfusion of the cultures are also important to note in her case. She comes back to India to her mother and later on tries to adjust in the societal expectations to play the role of good daughter and wife. The development of her character can be seen in the bold steps she takes in life but soon realizes the hollowness of her decisions. Then the self-examination takes her to her roots. Rama Nair while discussing the Prelude of the present novel writes:

Realism and fantasy interplay in the narrative to focus on the emerging self. It is a self that endures suffering, but it is a suffering that leads to self-understanding and an inward strength to break loose from past thoughts and experiences that are negative. (174)

The decisions taken in life are under the compulsions of instincts. They create those hiatus which can be filled only through experience. The peculiar quality of this novel is that all the female protagonists do not tread on the same path. They do not react in the same manner. Their problems are different in nature, circumstances and reactions. The most remarkable is that none of them commit suicide like the female protagonists of different other stories. They rather confront the situation in their own way. In order to survive, the characters make different efforts. Each individual has a 'hiatus' in his nature which is filled only by experience and understanding. It is the individual's balancing of oneself in a society along with one's instinctive compulsions. Sita unknowingly becomes the spokesperson of patriarchy. The aim that she holds to are same as handed down through generations by male-dominated world. In order to handover this inheritance she lost her own identity. Looking back in her life made her realize what she did. The self awareness makes her conscious of her loss and her servile condition. Her dusting veena symbolizes a fresh start. A woman's need to be loved makes Devi breaks all tradition bound limits of Indian women. She moves from one place to another to create her own space. She shows a radical departure from the traditionally subordinate role assigned to them. While peeling off unwanted, she realizes that she is not fitting into the mould which her expectations have created. Her coming back to her mother as a purposeful, conscious being displays courage to accept life and her roots. Most of the female protagonists of Githa Hariharan show the courage to face the odds of life, howsoever fragile they may be. The suffocation, restlessness and pain in the struggle of three generation are presented with daintiness. To understand the plight of woman, it is very important to take care of the trivial problems along with the larger issues of life. As in the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

Questions of political consciousness and self-identity are a crucial aspect of defining Third World women's engagement with feminism. And while these questions have to be addressed at the level of organized movements, they also have to be addressed at the level of everyday life in times of revolutionary upheaval as well as in times of peace. (76-77)

Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* has created characters of everyday life and with their meager problems touches upon the larger issues of gender exploitation embedded in pedagogic discourses. Devi is the central character and other equally strong women characters are explored in relation to her. These characters may appear abnormal in their behavior in some

cases but welcome life on their own terms. With the eyes of Devi and her emotions, one comes to realize the condition of women in changing scenario. Hariharan presents a picture of real society where such characters do occur.

Works Cited:

Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of the Night*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992.

Kundu, Rama. "For a story of my own-the female quest for self identity: A Global Perspective." *Feminist English Literature*. Ed. Manmohan K. Bhatnagar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1999.

Mohanty, C. T. *Feminism without Borders*. London: Duke University Press, 2003.

Nahal, Chaman. "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations." *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. Ed. Sushila Singh. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.

Nair, Rama. "The Art of Fiction: A Note on the "Prelude" of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Indian Women Novelists*. Set III Vol. IV. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995.

Sree, S. Prasanna. "Women as a Writer: Remapping Identities." *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. Part III. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005.