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Playing Male-Scripted Subordinate Roles: Gender Issues in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Among those Indian English women novelists who made their debut in the 1990s, Githa Hariharan occupies a very important place. Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and others, she has produced novels which reveal the deeply ingrained biases of Indian society against the feminine gender. Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book, her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) is a critically acclaimed work which deals with the issues of gender and identity in a multi-layered and subtle way. In this novel, Hariharan explores mainly the lives of three female characters, namely Devi, Sita and Mayamma who frequently find themselves trapped in stereotyped gender roles assigned to them by a patriarchal society which demands total subservience from women. This paper aims to critically explore how Githa Hariharan has interwoven the issues of gender and identity in the complex cultural and mythological milieu of Indian society.

The words 'gender' and 'sex', though roughly used as synonyms, do not exactly mean the same. Robert J. Stroller rightly points out that whereas the word 'sex' denotes a purely biological term, the word 'gender' is a social and cultural construct. (*Sex and Gender*, 7) It is true that the identity of a person is determined by the sex that one is born into but this identity is conditioned by one's social and cultural environment. In other words, it is not biology but rather our social and cultural value systems that shape our identity. Hence it is not inappropriate to say that 'sex' is conditioned by 'gender'. Gender role classification begins early in life and it continues till the end of life. For example, it is assumed that it is natural for girls to play with dolls but boys are derided, if they do the same. In traditional Indian society, girls are brought up in an environment where their individuality and self-assertion are by and large suppressed. This issue of the conditioning of feminine gender is brought to the fore by Hariharan in the very beginning of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Dr. Jyoti Singh, in her insightful study of Indian women novelists from a feminist and psycho-analytical viewpoint, comments in this regard:

The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the key note of the cardinal problem, i. e., the conditioning of the girl child. Women, specially mothers and grandmothers, show concern in encouraging their daughters to follow the stereotypes. The myths of Parvati, Sita and Savitri are built up and repeated to promote the traditional images of women which leads to selfless behaviour and in turn, to insensitivity and injustice. (36)

A critical analysis of *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals that mainly the following gender related issues are interwoven into it:

1. In matrimonial matters, the expectations from a would-be bride in Indian society are always higher than those from a would-be groom. A would-be bride is expected to be fair, beautiful, well educated, homely and prepared to 'adjust'. To hammer home the irony implied in such an expectation, Hariharan deliberately uses the word 'demand' in this context : "So they were looking for an accomplished bride, a young woman who would talk intelligently to her scientist husband's friends but who would also be, as all matrimonial ads in the Sunday papers 'demanded', fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to adjust." (*The Thousand Faces of Night*, 17)

2. Another anomaly of gender role assignment in Indian society is that it is the husband who decides which activities his wife should take up or how she should conduct herself in social circles. The case of Devi, the heroine of this novel, is a good example of this mindset. Her husband Mahesh adopts utterly hypocritical standards for her. For example, while he expects her to drink wine in official parties and functions, he disallows her to do the same when she is at home.

3. Women are expected to conform to certain archetypal images perpetuated by and glorified in TV serials, ads and print media. One of these is the image of a fair skinned bride. The story of the fair princess Damayanti, narrated to Devi during her childhood by her grandmother subtly points towards this mindset. Midway through the story of Damayanti, Devi remembers having asked her grandmother : "Will I be fair like Damayanti when I grow up?" And her grandmother had replied , "Of course you will. I will rub you down with coconut oil and turmeric till you are a pale, pale princess." (19)

4. Another gender bias reflected in the present novel is regarding the Indian husband's view of his wife, if she is highly educated. Mahesh (Devi's husband) instead of showing a sense of understanding for the cause of his wife's depression, contemptuously attributes her troubles to her education. He remarks curtly, "This is what comes of educating a woman, your grandmother was barely literate, wasn't she a happier woman than you are?" (74)

5. Indian society's preference for sons is reflected through one of the mantras uttered by the would-be husband and wife during the Hindu marriage ceremony. "I am the seed, you are the bearer... Let me lead you, so that we may bear a son." (80)

6. In the patriarchal social system, generally marriage is projected as an end all and be all for women in society . Hence they often become victims of an ingrained social pattern because right from childhood, a girl is conditioned to think of marriage as her main goal in life. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* also, the protagonist Devi's mind is fed on the stories of Sati, Damayanti, Gandhari and others, as narrated to her by her grandmother. While narrating the story of Gandhari, her grandmother makes some remarks which are loaded with irony, such as "...a woman meets her fate alone." "All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and deaf ones." Finally summing up the story of Gandhari, she comments, "She embraced her destiny--a blind husband---with a self sacrifice worthy of her noble blood."(29)

7. A daughter in-law is supposed to subsume her own individuality into the overall expectations of her in-laws' family. Devi's mother Sita is a classic case of the obliteration of

one's true self in deference to the expectations of her in-laws. Once when Sita's father in-law could not find something he needed for prayer and he saw that his daughter in-law was playing the veena, his anger knew no bounds. He roared: "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter in-law?" (p. 30)

8. Women, particularly widows, are ill-treated in their old age, specially when they are financially dependent on their sons. Lakshmi is a poignant example in this novel.

The above mentioned gender issues are reflected through six female characters in this novel: Devi, the heroine, her mother Sita, her mother in-law Parvati, Mayamma, a maid servant in Devi's in-law's house, Lakshmi, another old widow and finally, Devi's grandmother. These six characters span three generations of women and it is interesting to see how they individually grapple with and tackle the issues of gender in their own way. So far as the oldest generation, i.e. Devi's grandmother is concerned, she has lived her life as enjoined by the Hindu scriptures but here and there, she has found ingenious ways out of the stereo types by reinterpreting and re-visioning the myths of Sati, Parvati and Durga. She knows it very well that "a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning." (20) Devi also appreciates the ingenuity and homespun wisdom of her grandmother when she looks back at the stories of her grandmother:

In my grandmother's stories, there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending. No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own home-made yardsticks for life. (20)

The second generation of women is represented by Devi's mother Sita, mother in-law Parvati, Mayamma and Lakshmi. These four women confront and deal with gender issues in different ways. In case of Sita, (Devi's mother) it is as if her life has been divided into two distinct halves. In the first half, she immerses herself thoroughly into the role of a diligent housewife as soon as she is married, deliberately dumping the artistic, aesthetic side of her personality (her love of veena) into an obscure corner of her mind. When her father in-law reprimands her for playing the veena, in a frustrating fury she burns all her photos showing her playing the veena, snaps its strings and puts a veil of reticence around her. Sunanda Mongia aptly comments in this regard, "Having deliberately given up her subjectivity symbolized by the music of the veena, she valorizes the acceptance of a strongly institutionalised role." (126) If Sita's snapping the strings of her veena (which was her first love) is, "a silently seething rebellion", her subsequent decision (after the death of her husband and the marriage of her daughter) to take up the veena once again is her "emergence as a phoenix, embracing her true self." (Jyoti Singh, 44)

Devi's mother in-law Parvati shows yet another dimension of gender dynamics in Indian society. She leaves her husband, children and a thriving family under the care of her faithful maid Mayamma and goes in a 'self absorbed search for a god.' Nobody from her family makes any attempt to contact her or to call her back. Her husband comments curtly: "She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of a god, only death is a home coming." (64)

The issue of gender is further complicated when it is entwined with caste, as in the case of

Mayamma, the maid servant in Devi's in-laws' household. She has to undergo severe penance as she could not conceive. Hariharan quotes from Hindu scriptures to show how a childless woman is enjoined to do penance, "Like Sati you must burn yourself to death./ Like Sati you must vindicate your husband's honour and manhood./Like Parvati you must stand neck deep in cold turbulent waters, the hungry predatory fish devouring your feet." (94)

Mayamma is forced by her family to starve every other day, giving up salt and tamarind. To appease the evil conjunction of the planets, she performs many rituals because she is reminded again and again that a woman without child goes to hell. After many years when a son is born to her, he proves to be utterly ungrateful when he grows up. Mayamma's drunkard husband leaves her, stealing her gold ornaments. Her wastrel son dies soon after. Another character in this novel is Lakshmi whose plight symbolises the fate of thousands of old widows who are financially dependent on their sons. Lakshmi is forsaken by her only son who lives away from her in a nearby town, sending her twenty rupees per month and writing a line to her that he is too busy to visit her, he would come next year. Poor old mother keeps on waiting but gradually her patience gives way. She loses her senses. Her neighbours whisper among themselves, "Oh, this is what happens when a woman lives too long." (125) Lakshmi has no option but to live in her decrepit home where only rats and mongoose keep her company.

The third and youngest generation is represented by Devi, the heroine of this novel. In her case, the issue of gender takes a bit different shade. Brought up in a comparatively liberal environment, she receives higher education from a university in the USA, but when the issue of her marriage is to be decided, she finds herself trapped in the same stereotyped expectations and value systems which are a norm in Indian society. Dressed up in a resplendent saree, she is displayed as a doll by her mother before her prospective in-laws. After she is married to Mahesh, other anomalies of gender mindset are experienced by her. Her father in-law often quotes from the scriptures to make it unequivocally clear to her what the duties of a devoted wife are: "The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting, by serving her husband, she is honored in the heaven. A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him, a sumangali, her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermilion". (66) Mahesh too turns out to be a typical husband who "views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other"(49). He does not share any emotional bonding with Devi who finds this relationship unfulfilling. She internalises her dilemma over her relationship with Mahesh thus:

A marriage can not be suddenly forced into suddenly being there, it must grow naturally, like a delicate but promising sapling. What about us? What kind of a life will we make together? It seems too foolish, too intense a question to ask of this reasonable stranger who has already carefully examined, experienced, dissected, and is now ready to file away as settled, something as fragile and newborn as our marriage.(49)

Gradually Devi realises that theirs is a loveless marriage. The following excerpt tellingly brings home this point:

"Why did you marry me?" I asked.
"Whatever people get married for," Mahesh said. He peered into the mirror and readjusted the knot of his tie. "Thank God we Indians are not obsessed with love." (54-55)

As time passes, Devi finds Mahesh a male chauvinist who dictates to her what a wife should do. In short, they are on a different wave length altogether. Being no longer able to put up with the ennui of her married life, Devi elopes with Gopal, a musician. But even this relationship proves to be transient and shallow. Finally Devi decides to return to her mother where she can be her real self again.

From the foregoing analysis it is evident that issues of gender are inter woven into the fabric of *The Thousand faces of Night*. But they have not been stated dogmatically, as it is not the purpose of Hariharan as a creative writer. She in fact makes a very skilful and nuanced use of myths and narratives which is the most outstanding part of her technique of narration. Mythological stories embedded in the narrative of *The Thousand Faces of Night*, as in her other novels, not only provide the cultural matrix, they also help to shape the characters and view their actions. It is through subtle allusions to myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crisis of identity faced by her female characters. Hariharan's primary aim as a novelist is to weave a narrative of a cross section of women's lives and to delve deep into their inner worlds, even as some of them subvert received notions of traditions as depicted in the myths.

As someone who has participated in gender politics in Indian society in a very engaged way and effected change (notably her lawsuit against the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act which resulted in the famous Supreme Court judgement in 1999 according to which the mother also was to be considered as a natural guardian of the child), Githa Hariharan justifiably asserts that nearly all her works are informed by her beliefs, grown as they are out of her feminism and other political beliefs. But at the same time, she makes it equally clear that her novels are *not handmaiden to ideology* (emphasis mine). In an interview, she acknowledges that some of her friends were unhappy with her ending of *The Thousand Faces of Night* because the heroine goes back to her mother in the end. Disagreeing with them, Hariharan says that being a feminist and a novelist does not mean writing feminist manifestos. Were it so, she would better have written a tract on feminist issues, quips Hariharan wryly in her interview to Arnab Chakladar (*A Conversation with Githa Hariharan, Part II*) which puts the issue of the depiction of gender biases in her novels in a proper context.

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