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Myth and Reality in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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The Thousand Faces of Night is not just a womanish novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewrote and retold from a female point of view. The focus of this novel is on the inner lives of women, the inner spaces are reflected detail. We have great Saints, Rishis in our land who taught their people the art of living. We have produced great epics of the world that is *Ramayana and Mahabharata* which invariable preach the principles of life to the people. In classical Greek 'Mythos' signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. According to M.H.Abrams:

"A myth is one story in a mythology a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do and to establish the rationale for social customs and observations and the sanctions for the rules by which man conduct their lives."

Gradually myths are transformed into truths or facts. Once this happens, the perception about the world around is to a great extent based on these truths when we believe that something is true we are accepting it as real.

Thus, the journey from myth to reality is completed. In other words, the probability becomes authentic fact and reality. Thus, there is no reality but only different representations of reality. And these representations are ideologically constructed. *The Thousand Faces of Night* articulates the problems of women on the basis of Indian mythology. Hariharan links the plight of her women characters with the Indian myths as *Mahabharata* to the gods, goddesses and legendary heroines in the epics of India. The well known anthropologist Malinowski has to say about myth. In his opinion:

"Myth is vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard worked active force; it is not an individual explanation or artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdomThese stories do not live by idle interest; they are not narrated as historical accounts of ordinary facts. They are to the natives a statement of higher and more important truth of a primeval reality which is still regarded as the foundation of present day life."

The lives of three women Devi, Sita and Mayamma are separated by the gulf of time and caste but are linked by the shared reductiveness of their gender. The process of net-working among women of different ages and generations and castes in the novel 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 and hears strategies of women's survival, but her strategies later are different since every women has to learn for herself, and survival is the highest ideal in the struggle- ridden life of women. So the women in the novel have each to find a way to come to

terms with life. Bindu Jacobs writes; “The novel can be aptly defined as the several faces of thought presented by Githa Hariharan about the central theme- the struggle and predicaments of women in Indian society. The central theme is categorized as the quest for identity penance, female bonding, marriage, chaos and dilemma by the rebellious protagonist Devi.”

Myth, as a female discourse, represent also an escape for Devi from patriarchy and patriarchal defined womanhood, as it is to see in her identification with a female warrior and her fascination of strong mythical women who destroy man controlled dynasties. Devi remembers and retells her grandmother’s story about Damayanti’s swayamvara, the event where Damayanti is supposed to choose a bachelor as her husband in contest to her own husband’s choice. The princes’ Damayanti chooses Nala, the king of Nishadas, in such a fascination, that she does see and hear anybody else at the swayamvara. The whole situation is reversed when Devi is married to Mahesh who is no prince but a Regional manager. Her dream world is shattered and she is happy that her grandmother is no longer alive; “I am glad she is not here to see me at my swayamvara the princes robe she lovingly stitched for me”(20). Devi recalls all the mythological stories as told to her by her grandmother and sees the cracks in the bridge her grandmother had built between those stories and the real- life stories. She is reminded of the story of her cousin Uma which propelled her grandmother to relate the story of Amba from the Mahabharata. Uma was a motherless child. When she got married all were happy as her-in-laws were very wealthy. But all her dreams were shattered when her father-in-law tries to molest her. She left the house and came to live with Devi’s grandmother. The grandmother tried to comfort her by saying:

“Ah Devi why weep over Uma? A high-born princess or even a goddess has been the victim of disaster. But a woman like Amba, a truly courageous woman finds the means to transform her hatred the fall that overtakes her , into a triumph”(Hariharan 36).

Devi, now grown up knows the difference that lies between the strength of Amba and a more human being like Uma. Everyone gains knowledge as Sigmund Freud says; “Widely different sources, from fairy tales and myths, jokes and folklore.....saying and songs of different people and from poetic and colloquial usage of language” (166). Indian mothers train, protect and guide their daughters and all their endeavors. In Indian social set-up marriage is considered as a traditional role of women. Githa Hariharan’s fictional explorations of women’s relationship with the dominant myths of Indian culture imaginatively reiterates Katrak’s observation that in most patriarchal culture women elevated status in mythology stands paradoxically alongside their harsh lived realities.

The stories of Pati, Baba and Mayamma are grounded in ancient myth, inscriptions from the laws of Manu and the real stories of lived experience respectively. The author makes a useful distinction between normative myth and subversive myth. She defines the normative myth as one which tells you what sort of wife you should be, what sort of daughter-in-law and so forth. An acknowledgement of this presents the possibility of alternatives as notion of the subversive myth is described as the survival teaching myth. The consequence of the stories was so great that Devi created her fantasy world where she imagined herself as; “an incarnation of Durga, walking the earth to purge it of jowled slimy tailed greed” (Hariharan 43). One day while playing in the house Devi found her mother’s photograph holding a veena in her hands. The grandmother told Devi Sita was a very good veena player and she also told the reason why Sita stopped playing it. But before telling the reason she told her the story of Gandhari from the great epic the

Mahabharata. After finding the lie about the blindness of her husband in her fury she made a vow and tore off a piece of cloth and tied it over her eyes for the whole life. In her appraisal “Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman, she embraced her destiny a blind husband, with a self sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (Hariharan 29). The grandmother makes comparison between Gandhari and Sita as both became dutiful wives. Similarly Sita pulled strings out of the wooden base. It was her way of protest. In order to prove that she was a dutiful wife, she stopped playing veena. Devi realized that Gandhari’s anger wrapped tightly round her head in a lifelong blindfold. Gandhari rebelled but silently. Similarly, Sita made her fury her life force. She abandoned the playing veena and never touched it again and became an obedient daughter-in-law. For Devi’s grandmother Gandhari story seems to the mythological equivalent to Sita sacrifice. But there are two ways to interpret this story both the myth and the real life: the one way is to suppose Gandhari a sacrificing wife, who does not want to privileged by the light of her eyes while her husband is blind. In a heroic way she ties a cloth around her eyes in order to feel the same as her husband and to be a good, dutiful wife. This would rather be the male version of an interpretation. Feminist, or female, would say, as I already mentioned that Gandhari ties her eyes out of her great anger. She is desperately angry to have been married to a man, not knowing that he is blind, and is expected to be content with her fate. But she is not so, her act is to be seen as a protest against her fate. She refuses to see her blind husband and anything else to express her anger for the rest of her life.

Both the cases present a deep rooted and all pervasive social reality of India that is a loyal wife and daughter-in-law is only one who sacrifices her passion and puts her domestic duties on priority. Sita became what others expected her to be, even at the cost of her own passion and individuality. Observing her predicament K Damodar Rao writes:

“In a dominant patriarchal society like India, it is not uncommon to see women, pitted against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against themselves resulting in self inflicted wounds and penance. This is itself is a resultant factor of the realization of the impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliations on them. This hostility against oneself is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the Mahabharata” (160).

In the novel there is also the story of Parvati ; Devi’s mother-in-law, interwoven with the mythological story of Shiva and Parvati; the divine couple who represent the most successful marriage. Mayamma tells Devi that her father-in-law married Parvati because, “It was an old reliable name” (Hariharan 62). What is most ironical in the story is that the man, who had always told stories of virtuous women, is deserted by his wife in her search of God. In the mythological story of Shiva and Parvati also, it was Parvati who had initiated Shiva into becoming a yogi while she took charge of the household working at her marriage like any other mortal woman.

Thus we see that Githa Hariharan has brought our ancient myths to our reality. Past is seen not as static but in a state of constant flux which achieves simultaneity with the present as they go on to incorporate it by shaping it.

In the second part, Devi feels as a prisoner in her own house hemmed in by the walls, like the trees in the garden. The garden itself has a symbolic value, especially when Sita neat garden gets wild at the end. This, of course, shows Sita’s inner feelings, she has quit to live in total self

discipline which was also expressed in the tidiness of her garden, she decides at the end to find herself, and lets everything grows as it is. Devi returns metaphorically to her mother's womb, same as she returned from the USA to the mother earth, symbolized by Sita, Ashapura Devi strongly celebrates the women who have broken away from the four walls of their rooms and have spread their wings in the sky. Devi learned as she developed throughout the novel, to win her way into the sky because to stay within the walls of enclosure and to depend on man cannot help the success women's emancipation.

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