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Mutability of Tales in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract:

The transient nature of the myths, stories and tales is inevitable. Tales change with time and the context in which they are narrated. This fleeting nature of the tales is taken advantage as a strategy of emancipation, by telling and retelling, employed effectively in the cause of women's liberation. They serve the purpose of insistent interrogation of the received tradition and as a means to heal the wounds of one's soul. With an attempt to know the tradition differently, the burden of the tradition is lightened and shifted, the meaning and scope re-invented and re-made, changing from the fixity into a free zone of eternal mutations and transmutations thereby reclaiming a new lineage and forging a gynocentric heritage.

Keywords: Transient, Retelling, Emancipation, Mutations, Transmutations, Gynocentric.

A tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted.

- Walter Burkert

Human beings are updated versions of our near and past ancestry. Though with the passage of time mutations are inevitable, the past heritage, culture and tradition finds its seat deep rooted in our blood. As Jaidev says in *Ideology Versus Ideology* that these myths "still occupy our collective unconsciousness and affect us through their ideology" (19). Consciously or unconsciously, we relive the past of our ancestors since we are constantly in touch with them in one way or the other. Stories, tales and myths serve this purpose of bonding us with our past and thereby act as an instrument in propagating the greatness of our ancestors, our nation and the human race.

Universally, stories are used to explain a practice, a belief or a phenomenon. It is a universal means of communicating cultural traditions and values, as well as a vehicle for passing on information about history, science, government and politics. It is one of the most effective sources of inspiration to man. It inspires man with epic tales and myths. It portrays the lives of epic heroes, legends and even ordinary people who rose to extraordinary greatness through their wit and valour, thereby enabling the readers to draw their own lessons and use that knowledge as an insight to their problems and living.

Indian tales have an ancient history and are, from time immemorial used to reinforce our history, culture and societal norms. They serve as a yardstick of morality and standard of conduct, especially for women. In the traditional Indian family system, these stories and myths have a unique importance as they pass it from one generation to another. These tales facilitate the Indian women with the knowledge about the experience of women in the past and their survival strategies, in order to improve and empower themselves.

These tales and myths play an important role in the literature, and writers of the world have used them to “present culture and social aspects of their respective countries” (Gupta, 101). Indian writers are no exception. Through the presentation of these myths and tales, they attempt to present “a modern situation and refers the readers to a familiar analogy” (White, 23). However, steps apart, the women writers through their presentation of myth represent life and reality but from a female point of view in contrast to the men’s picturisation of women merely as the subjugated, the other.

Githa Hariharan is one such greatest asset of Indian English writing. She is the distinguished recipient of the prestigious Commonwealth Award for her maiden novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, for the year 1993. Githa Hariharan’s novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a novel told from the female point of view about human relationships, the solitary confinement of marriage and what it means to be a woman in Indian traditional and social set up. For these purposes, Hariharan uses stories from myths, of Brahmin saints and real life stories.

The novel revolves around the lives of women, both fictional and real, with Devi, the protagonist, at the centre of the narrative. In fact, the stories are told and the actions take place for the sake of Devi and in relevance to her. Among the various women characters narrated and represented in the novel, three women – Devi, Sita and Mayamma – of three different generations and class, play a significant role. Though different in social set up, the lives of these three women share a common strand of subjugation by the restrictive rules of patriarchy. All these women have trouble adjusting to a constricting and dehumanizing environment into which they find themselves trapped. Even while trying to adapt and be successful, the efforts become fruitless as in the case of Sita. Finally, it is when she realises her true self she makes sense of her life.

Stories from myths, about saints and real life character are narrated to Devi by three people at three different phases of her life. She grew as a child listening to the mythical stories of her grandmother. After her marriage, in her in-laws’ house, her father-in-law introduced her to the stories from the Manu and about Brahmin saints. Later, when she was aspiring to be a mother, she was acquainted with real life stories through Mayamma, the servant maid. While these stories reflect the rules and tradition placed on Indian women, they also show a number of subversive possibilities. Her grandmother’s stories were a prelude to her womanhood, “an initiation into its subterranean possibilities” (Hariharan, 51). Her father-in-law’s stories define the limits of womanhood as a wife. Her grandmother’s goddesses and forgotten mythical women characters are replaced with her father-in-law’s paternalistic laws of Manu and Brahmin saints, which emphasises female subordination as the legitimacy of religious dogma. Her father-in-law’s dominant male discourse is subverted and shattered by her grandmother’s female discourse. If Manu speaks of female subordination, the grandmother’s discourse glorifies strong, rebellious and angry women whose wrath wreaked havoc and destroyed entire male – controlled dynasties. It is this subversion and rebellion, which guide Devi in the crucial stage of her life in quest of her selfhood.

Devi recalls her grandmother’s story about Damayanti’s swayamvara when the Srinivasan’s family visited her on “a preliminary visit” (Hariharan, 17). Though the amphitheatre of the swayamvara was filled with “A long precession of kings, princes and gods” (Hariharan, 18), “Damayanti listened with only one ear. Her heart, loyal and steadfast, never wavered from the path leading to Nala, the King of the Nishads, and her feet, adorned with gold rings and henna, were sure of their destination” (Hariharan, 20). Though she pretended to listen to other kings, she chose “her heart’s desire by great cunning” (Hariharan, 20). Men woven myths glorify Damayanti’s love for Nala, the role of a dutiful wife;

grandmother's and Devi's retelling not only glorifies her but also highlights her cunningness to win her yearning, the survival strategy.

Once Devi came across a photo of her mother, Sita, in which she was seen with a veena. The grandmother told Devi that her mother was talented in playing veena right from her childhood. However, after her marriage, in her in-laws' house, once when she was lost in her rapturous delight of playing veena, she did not hear the trembling angry voice of her father-in-law calling her. Seeing her with veena, he roared, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (Hariharan, 30). From then on, she gave up her veena and she converted her desire and passion for veena into powerful energy to direct her destiny as well as that of others, her husband and daughter. Hers was an act of self-sacrifice to attain the goal and assert herself through her role as wife, mother, and "a dutiful daughter-in-law" (Hariharan, 30). Sita's renunciation of her long-loved veena is compared to that of Gandhari's act of blindfolding herself from enjoying and admiring the beauty of the world and life itself.

When Gandhari walked with myriads of dreams into her husband's palace, which was "twice as big, twice as magnificent as her parents' palace" (Hariharan, 28), she was shocked and disappointed to learn two hard lessons in her life: first her husband's blindness with "the white eyes, the pupils glaze and useless" (Hariharan, 29). Secondly, the splendid palace lacked only one luxury – privacy" (Hariharan, 28). Gandhari said nothing but "she embraced her destiny – a blind husband – with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood" (Hariharan, 29) and blindfolded herself forever. Gandhari's self-sacrifice and that of Sita's too was not that of "just another willful, proud woman" (Hariharan, 29). Theirs was not just a passive acceptance but passive and silent protest against the wrong done to them. Their pride and anger became their "life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering" (Hariharan, 29), self-sacrifice and self-denial only to attain and assert their wifehood.

Gauri, Devi's grandmother's maidservant, had worked in the Brahmin houses as long as she could remember, "to build a pile of dowry-gold, chain, bangle by bangle" (Hariharan, 31). When her marriage was fixed with a bridegroom from a big family, she had managed to save eighteen sovereigns. Devi went to Gauri's wedding, out of curiosity, with a maidservant on either side, and gave her grandmother's gift and returned home. Years later, Gauri came to see Devi's grandmother asking for her old job and complained that "her husband was an animal" and "treated her like dirt" (Hariharan, 32). Devi's grandmother did not give her job again but sent her away with a ten-rupee note since her grandmother knew about the story of Gauri's elopement with her young brother-in-law. That night, her grandmother, who was "unusually quiet, with a kind of hurt bewilderment" (Hariharan, 32) narrated a story about "the beautiful girl who married a snake" (Hariharan, 33).

A childless couple once offered the gods a series of austere sacrifices and their prayers were answered with "a little black snake" (Hariharan, 33) as their son. When the snake grew into adulthood, the father, at the righteous wrath of the mother, started his journey to distant lands "in search of a wife fit for (his) my son" (Hariharan, 33). His host offered his own beautiful daughter. When the girl saw a snake as her husband, she accepted her life without any "lamenting and wailing" (Hariharan, 33) and said, "A girl is given only once in marriage... Let me go to my waiting husband" (Hariharan, 33). "She married him and was a devoted wife" (Hariharan, 34). One night, "when she clasped her arms about him, she felt the scales soften underneath her hands till they touched tender human flesh. She embraced the good fortune she had brought about with her loving hands..." (Hariharan, 34). After that, whenever Devi saw Gauri, "who seemed her usual cheerful self" (Hariharan, 34), she longed

to give her some clue, “a hint that would enable to penetrate the snake-skin that spread itself between her and feminine fulfillment” (Hariharan, 34).

Uma, Devi’s cousin, returned to her grandmother’s house, a year after her marriage, as her husband and “his father drank till she was stupefied with fear” and “her drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips” (Hariharan, 35). “Her foreboding grew into terror” and “even her girlhood, spent with an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother, had not prepared her for this trial” (Hariharan, 35). “When everything in the house was damp, limp, full of murmured secrets” (Hariharan, 35) and “sadness and perhaps a shadow of uncertainty” (Hariharan, 36), the grandmother told the story of Amba, “female avenger(s)”, (Hariharan, 40) to Devi. “The noble Bheeshma, born of a goddess”, (Hariharan, 36) went to the swayamvara of “three beautiful princesses – Amba, Ambika and Ambalika” (Hariharan, 36). When Amba, the eldest, “held out her garland to the young king of Salwa” (Hariharan, 36) and even before “the jasmines had barely brushed the princely neck” (Hariharan, 36), Bheeshma “interrupted her heart’s destiny” (Hariharan, 36) and took the three princesses to his stepmother, the queen of the Kurus, for his stepbrother. On knowing that Amba’s “heart had been given away, her garland had almost encircled the neck of the man she had chosen” (Hariharan, 36), Bheeshma and her stepmother permitted her to follow her heart’s desire and asked her to be “a faithful wife to the man” (Hariharan, 37) she had chosen. However, Salwa was not happy to welcome her. He roared with crude, mirthless laughter and said, “Do you think I feast on leftovers? I am a king. I do not touch what another man has won in battle. Go to Bheeshma. He won you when his arrow struck my eager hands on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me?” (Hariharan, 37)

Amba felt desperate. She felt all the more desperate when Bheeshma refused her due to “his vow of celibacy” (Hariharan, 36). Her fury and hatred became her life-force, the desire for revenge. She penanced for long years in the forest, received lord Shiva’s blessings and died, only to be reborn as Drupada’s daughter, raised as a son and tasted “the heady sweetness of the beloved’s blood in the battle” (Hariharan, 39), in Kurukshetra War. Devi learnt that the “difference between Amba, and a mere mortal, a woman like Uma, lay in the strength to seize sorrow and uncertainty, and pour the mixture into the sieve of her penance. Whatever emerged, however bloody and vengeful, was a distilled potion of good fortune” (Hariharan, 40).

When Devi attained her puberty, her grandmother said, “It means you are a woman now, my child. It means that you will be a mother” (Hariharan, 88) and added “motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast. A mother has to walk strange and tortuous paths” (Hariharan, 88) and narrated the story of goddess Ganga. The Bharata King, Shantanu, fell in love with the beautiful damsel, Ganga and wanted to marry her. Ganga accepted to marry him on a condition that he should not ask her name and stop her from doing what she must do. Every year she bore him a son and as soon as the baby was born, she threw him into the river. Likewise, she drowned her seven sons. The powerless and grief-stricken Shantanu was speechless at the fear of losing her. However, when she was about to drown their eighth child, Shantanu stopped her and broke his word of promise. As a result, Ganga plunged into her river, leaving Shantanu to be both the father and mother to their eighth child and disappeared. After many years, when Devi was dreadfully disappointed to be a mother, she understood what her grandmother would have said then: “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).

Devi’s long waiting days of her married life was filled by her father-in-law’s, Baba’s stories. “Baba’s stories remind me of my grandmother’s, but they are also different.... They

always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife” (Hariharan, 51). Baba cited the incidents from the lives of saintly mystics and composers of a bygone era: Muthuswamy Dikshitar and his two wives, dark and fair, “like the sun and moon on either side” (Hariharan, 51) to elucidate the nobleness of raga, music; Jayadeva and his wife, Padmavati to expound how women “have always been the instruments of the saint’s initiation into bhakti” (Hariharan, 65); Purandara Dasa and his wife, Sarasvati Bai to explicate how “a greatman can see the spiritual greatness of his wife” (Hariharan, 65); Narayana Tirtha and his ideal wife to show how he was “initiated into sanyasa” (Hariharan, 66) and thereby, to exemplify his “wife’s selfless devotion” (Hariharan, 66); and finally, the stories of Syama Sastri and his wife, and Thyagaraja and his second wife to show that “a virtuous wife” (Hariharan, 67) dies before her husband.

Apart from his stories on the rules of conduct for a woman, and wife especially, Baba quoted from the laws of Manu too to enable Devi to go in the path of an ideal Brahmin and an impeccable wife:

- “A Brahmin shrinks from honours as from poison; humility he covets as if it is a nectar. The humble one sleeps happily, wakes up happily, and moves about in this world happily; he who has inflicted the humiliation perishes” (Hariharan, 52).
- “The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifices to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens” (Hariharan, 55).
- “The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word, and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does” (Hariharan, 70-71).

Finally, he emphasises the need and humanity to glorify women: “All men are enjoined to cherish women, and look after them as their most precious wards. Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods delight; where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless” (Hariharan, 65).

Mayamma’s real life stories, on the other hand, stranger than mythical stories and scripts, teaches Devi the strategies of survival. This is an important lesson that every woman has to learn for herself, and survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of women. Guided by this lesson, Devi decides to return to her mother Sita, with whom she had never shared strong ties. She always felt a lack of identity both in her parental home and in her relationship with men. She now shares a strange kinship with Sita. With this realisation, she decides to start her life afresh. This time she need not look for anchors outside herself. She had gained enough strength to assert herself and survive on her own and at the same time, confront and comfort her mother too. “She rehearsed in her mind the words, the unflinching look she had to meet Sita with to offer her love. To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning” (Hariharan, 139)

Stories, thus, are essential in everyone’s lives. They act as a guiding light in life’s vicissitudes. However, fully equipped with the morals and the wide vista of the stories, one should not lose the skill of reasoning and thinking, and the indispensability to react. Myth is always important for people everywhere; there’s always the need to reinterpret and see for ourselves what myth means for us in our times.

All long, the myths that the readers come across in *The Thousand Faces of Night* give Devi different perspectives with regard to the role of women in the past. It is true that the

mythical Sita and Ghandari are dutiful wives as enunciated by the stories. However, going deeper into the stories helps one analyse that ancient women also had a different or personal reason to accept their role as submissive wives. As seen in the case of Ghandari, the readers realise that she is totally vindictive or angry with men who deprived her of the visual beauty of the world. The implication is each woman had a reason to survive in a male dominated world. The title, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, thus illustrates that change alone is permanent and any story or the ideology of the story changes in tune with the nature of the person who reads it. Stories are like mirrors. It mirrors one's confidence or diffidence in tackling the issues of life. Devi learns to put up a bold face in a changing or challenging world and the stories facilitate her to comprehend that it is all possible.

The multidimensionality of a work of art is that it lends itself to different interpretations. While science has one truth or one content which is changeless, art has many faces. It differs from person to person or place to place. The core remains the same but the peripherals seem to take different wings to different premises. What the critics call Reader Response theory establishes the same analogy. Having this stance as a base, the researcher has analysed Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* in the light of mutability of tales in order to assert that fundamentally the reader, and not the story, occupies the centre.

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