

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT: A SENSITIVE SAGA OF WOMEN STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE

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Article info

Article Received: 17/01/2023

Article Accepted: 11/02/2023

Published online:20/02/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.103](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.103)

Abstract

Literature is a mirror to the society, also a tool for the writer to express his/her opinion, through the literary piece, on the issues concerning the masses. Myths or fables are indispensable in a culture; are very helpful in transmission and dissemination of core values among people. Though superficially, myths appear to cement the bonds between men and women, but intently carry the powerful designs of patriarchal ideology. Post-modern writers, especially women writers, uncover the hidden designs and dig at the patriarchal thought system that constructs a 'woman'. They, moving ahead of love, sex, marriage and rearing of children, try to look beyond and focus on equality and existential issues that involve gender dynamics. Githa Hariharan, who won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993 for her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, delves deep into this struggle of survival by devouring apart the mist created by these literary tools.

Key words: literature, patriarchy, myth, woman, culture

All sorrows can be borne if we put them in a story or tell a story about them. - Isak Dinesen

Women's movement, in our country, has a long and distinguished history, bringing forward several social issues like dowry deaths, female foeticide, and violence against women, ignorance, illiteracy, gender discrimination within families and society etc. The Indian women novelists, in the past two decades, explore extensively the various problems faced by women in India besides depicting the struggles of women in a patriarchal society where they were often subjected to discrimination and violence. They concentrated on different facets of women; their perpetual struggle against the odds includes fighting against oppression, faced by two young sisters, Rahel and Estha, who are from a lower-caste family in Kerala in *The God of Small*

Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy. Like Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), highlights the trauma, the two Indian women, Sai and Biju, face due to cultural differences between India and United States apart from discrimination and violence, they are subjected to, on the basis of gender.

The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, focuses on the lives of two generations of an Indian family living in the United States, and the dichotomy the family's female members face due to their cultural background and gender. These novels, apart from providing insight into the ways of discrimination and violence those women are subjected to, but provide an opportunity to explore the various ways in which women can cope with, and resist the oppressive forces that they face. Their

literary works in English not only mirror this muliebrity but also celebrated this change.

Githa Hariharan, in her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, articulates these wrapped themes, and deconstructs these with the help of Indian Mythology. She rereads the Indian myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabharata, and relates them to women characters of her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*(1992), which won her the Commonwealth Writer's prize. It is a sensitive saga of women struggling to survive in a world of shattered dreams.

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* encapsulates the life of three woman characters. Through these women of different generations- Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook; Sita, the mother Devi, and Devi, the daughter and the central character, Githa Hariharan dexterously explores the interpersonal relationships along with the prescription of the gender dynamics by means of Indian Mythology. The ancient stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damyanti and others reflect on the life-journey of these characters in the novel. Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) unfolds the struggle of her women characters- Mayamma, Sita and Devi; their undeclared and non-vocalized protest after being subjected to torture and neglect. Hariharan shows the Indian woman has come a long way in her search for self.

Devi's grandmother, the oldest among all the women portrayed in the novel, is not actively involved in the novel's action and events. She, through her treasure of myths and stories, makes her presence felt throughout the book. Devi cherishes these *sophos* of the grandmother, as "stories of golden splendor"(27), who "was always our anchor rock. Never wrong, never to be questioned, a self evident fact of our existence"(16). The grandmother belongs to that generation of Indian women who remained confined to their households and were expected to be ideal and virtuous. These Indian mothers upskill, protect and guide their daughters, emotionally and physically, on their all endeavors. With their mother guidance and emotional support they internalize their identity.

Contrary to prevalent condition of women in those days, the grandmother seems surprisingly individualistic and modern in her outlook. She dissects and interprets, in her own way, the ancient myths and legends which were supposed to be considered as referential texts to template role models for women. Her interpretations are *a la mode*, asserting the individuality of women as human beings, and appreciating and endorsing their resistance to oppression and subjugation. Sita, mother of Devi, though very apt in playing veena, had to sacrifice her immense talent for the duties she owes to her family as a daughter- in- law, wife and mother. She entered her husband's house with veena, a musical instrument to play on, as a part of dowry. One day her father- in- law called her for performing some works before the morning pooja. She could not hear as she was playing veena. Then her father- in- law scolded Sita, being insensate to him and enjoined upon her to "put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law". In a momentary exasperation and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play veena again and replied in a whisper "Yes. I am a wife, a daughter- in- law" (30). Sita had to face a horrible situation of her life in a canonical and more tradition rooted society. She had to suffer alone, within her heart; did penance without uttering any word.

She hung her head over the veena for minute that seemed to stretch for ages, enveloping us in an unbearable silence. Then she reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They came apart with a discordant twang of protest. (30)

In her self-destructive anger, she is the mythical Gandhari from the Mahabharata, being a dutiful wife, a true *arthanginni*, who "saw the white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless" (29), in anger at being married off to a blind prince, had tied a bandage over her own eyes. The grandmother views the situation differently. Grandmother perceives this act of Gandhari, of blind folding herself, as a sign of protest and expression of seething rage, though non-vociferous in nature.

In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing.....groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury. Gandhari was not just another willful proud woman—she embraced her destiny—a blind husband—with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. (29)

Devi, the protagonist, is a modern Indian woman educated abroad. When she goes to America for studies, she meets Dan, a black, gentle and charming. A bond of friendship is forged between them; Dan “was Devi’s answer to the white claustrophobia” (3), and they “approach romance, ...promises had been half-made in the dark shadows of the parking lot outside the grimy, friendly dinner, they often met at” (3). But Devi feels alienated in Dan’s world: “he is an alien mirage, some barely remembered dream of clandestine passion” (3).

Devi’s existence is stifled in her mother’s vengefully constituted fortress “that shut out the rest of the world,... a secure womb” (13). It was her grandmother’s stories which provided an escape route for Devi. Grandmother’s stories taught Devi to dream, to fly, to tear, to shreds the suffocating veils of femaleness. After her studies, “the brief dream” (11), are over, she returns to India.

Devi recollects her grandmother’s story of Damyanti that was taken from the Mahabharata, Nala, the king of Nishad was brave, handsome and virtuous. Damyanti’s father decided holding her Swayamvara. Damyanti was brave and determined to espouse, “her heart, loyal and steadfast, never wavered from the path leading to Nala, the king of the Nishadas.” So she threw the garland around Nala’s neck and espoused with him amidst all the intrigues made even by gods. Her grandmother “twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own....yardsticks for life” (20), and concludes the story with a moral, “A woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning” (20).

In contrast, another myth that of Amba is a more vocal voice of protest. Amba makes ardent efforts to avenge the wrongs done to her. The grandmother appreciates Amba’s efforts and her revenge by calling her “a truly courageous woman, who finds the means to transform her hatred, the

fate that overtakes her, into a triumph” (36). The grandmother feels Amba’s pain at being rejected by Salwa whom she loved, and “her garland had almost encircled” (36) his neck, and being discarded at a time when she needed him the most. Her view is that “a woman without a husband has no home” (38). Devi’s grandmother thus upholds a traditional view that a woman needs to be respected, loved and looked after by her husband and family; but she is modern enough to say, in the absence of this, a woman has every reason to protest. In this way the grandmother recognizes a woman’s right as an individual and a human being. She sows these seeds in Devi’s psyche with her stories, so that when Devi grows up, she has a sense of individuality and strives to maintain it.

Devi’s rebellious spirit is not so easily tamed. In her world Devi images herself as “an incarnation of Durga walking the earth to purge it of fat jowled slimy tailed greed” (43). Born in a traditional Tamil Brahmin family she is sent abroad for higher education. Back home she was matched by her mother to Mahesh, a regional manager of a multinational firm at Bangalore whose job demands long tours. After marrying Mahesh, Devi meets her father-in-law, Baba and the caretaker-cum-cook in that home, an old crone, Mayamma. After marriage she finds that she has strayed unexpectedly into an existence devoid of dialogue. She refuses to accept the insignificant and secondary status assigned to her by Mahesh. She wants an equal share in her matrimonial partnership. She feels that marriage with Mahesh caged her like “a stuffed eagle perched on a little stand of cured wood. Touched up with oily paint, sprayed with lacquer-like gloss, the stuffed bird was a hideous mockery of the winged creature that had soared high above the clouds in its untamed youth” (57). She questions Mahesh about his work: “tell me about your work” (71). She asks him, “why did you marry me?”. And was stunned by the reply “whatever people get married for”(54). Her concern about their relationship is genuine, but he ignores her frustration, and evades troublesome issues. “stop it all” he says, “you know you always feel better in the morning. What he meant is that he won’t be there in the morning” (74). This emotional

and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba.

Baba was a Sanskrit professor, an intellectual man. He narrates some stories, intentionally, about womanhood and the wifely vows and duties in a household. Devi compares his stories with that of her granny. While analyzing Baba's stories, Devi says, "always have for their centre point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife" (51). Her grandmother's stories of vengeful, magnificent, strong women are now replaced by her father-in-law's discourse that is firmly patterned on Manu's laws.

The vast emptiness of Devi in laws house, her husband's long spells of absence, the lack of a proper companion, identity "as lifeless as the stuffed bird" (57), the death of her father-in-law and her inability to produce children lure her to Gopal, in whom she imagines that she has found an ideal companion. She, fed up being "a wooden puppet" (83), decides to "soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas" (95), as Gopal comes in Devi's life raking embers buried in the ash of her hopes and dreams. He comes as a breath of fresh air, and "the lush prison around me dissolves into a green blur" (78). In search of care, concern and commitment, she walks out of wedlock, courageously. She goes with Gopal because she has an impression that she matters to him, that her happiness in his concern but the illegitimacy of their relationship makes the matter worse. While with Gopal, Devi gradually develops a sense of void, just as when she was with Mahesh. She feels lonely, lost and alienated. Life with Gopal does not afford Devi the space she craves for, so Devi finally turns to her mother Sita. Once again, she protests and asserts herself. "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" (139). In the novel, we find not only Devi, but her mother Sita also experiencing a spiritual change thoroughly. They are fully aware that a woman is mainly not a wife or a mother but an individual in her own right.

The third female character of the novel, portrayed as an ideal female character is Mayamma.

The family retainer in Devi's father-in-law's house, Mayamma, was married when she has not come to age, just twelve "who rubbed her eyes and yawned as she leant back in her father's lap" (79). The innocent childhood when, "I put away the shells, the smooth round pebbles I had played with in my parents' home" was nipped in the bud, and pulverized to "took into my hand the iron skillet and blew the fire into the stove even before my mother-in-law woke up" (116). For ten long years, this situation subsisted but unfortunately Mayamma did not bear a child. She, therefore, being conformist "had to practice penance for her being barren. She dipped herself again and again in pure coldness, starved every other day, she gave up salt and tamarind...meditated. Fed rice and curd to snakes; worshipped various gods and goddesses etc" (80). In addition to this, her mother-in-law tortured her and her wayward husband kicked her. Ultimately a son was born to her on an auspicious occasion of Diwali. Her miseries come to a halt momentarily. But her child "fed on lavish helping of tenderness and yearning even before he was born, turned sour early" (81); her husband deserted her when the son turns eight.

Broken emotionally, without any prop, her patience gives way to a silent, sullen protest. When her son falls ill; she looks after him "but there is no tenderness left in her hand...he died" (82). To register her protest, she "burnt it (her horoscope), with all the signs of luck on it, whole and intact...with the body of her son" (82). Mayamma had to suffer untold miseries; she became the one without emotion. Mayamma encouraged, and even supported those female folks who had the similar fate with hers. She not only accepted Devi's decision of walking out of Mahesh's life, but also she even blessed and wished her. She stopped to obey the old traditional values that prevented a woman to achieve her rights of making choices resulted from the ill-treatment of her family.

All the three women in the novel tried, their utmost level, to brave the strong oppositions and design a room for their own.

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