

Predicament of Three Women in Githa Hariharan's the Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

Women in India are portrayed as Goddess in olden days but at the same time they are being dominated by the men in the society and also in the family. Once they are meant to look after the house hold works, rear children and care for the older generations in their home. They are not left to think independently as their thoughts and actions are being dominated by the men before some four decades. But since the last four decades the perception of women have been changed with the interference of the feminist writers and critiques. In literature the feminist critiques and the feminist writers condemned the way women are treated in their family and society at large. The claims that the feminist writers made women to break the taboo and look at them as independent human being who have will and wish to express themselves freely against the male chauvinism. Githa Hariharan is one such feminist writer who in her fiction portrayed women to break such taboo and fight for identity and in this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the predicament of three women Mayamma, Sita and Devi, who represent three different generations of a traditional South Indian Brahmin family in The Thousand Faces of Night.

KEYWORDS: Male chauvinism, taboo, self identity, disillusioned and rebelliousness.

ANALYSIS OF THE THREE WOMEN

Dr.Padmini and S.K. Sudha have rightly observed that:

In The Thousand Faces of Night Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality. (126)

Devi returns to India from America for the sake of her widowed mother, Sita. Sita leads Devi to the altar of marriage. She agrees to a negotiated marriage like a good Indian girl. Devi's broad-mindedness, education and experiences challenge so many blind beliefs, but she sheds her desires to fulfil her mother's desire and to uphold the family honour.

Mahesh, even before their marriage, openly tells Devi about his nature of work, his tours and informs her that his father and maidservant will be there and he will be lonely sometimes. In fact she admires Mahesh's and admits his honesty and saying he needs a woman who will be a wife and mother. But later, she realizes that she cannot cope with his attitude towards marriage and her loneliness.

Hence, Devi elopes with Gopal to get her desires fulfilled. She feels that her decision to live with Gopal would give her a real journey in her life. Devi remembers her happy movements with Gopal, “He knows every muscle on my face, he sees the shadow before it falls across my eyes. We talk, he sings. When he takes my hand and brushes the fingertips with his moist mouth, the lush prison around me dissolves into a green blur”(78).

The three women belong to different generations and are different in terms of education and social circumstances. Mayamma could not bear a child for several years, Sita has a girl child, and Devi couldn't bear one. Mayamma's husband and mother-in-law have tortured her physically. Sita's troubles are more mental; and Devi's are due to her husband's indifferent attitude which disturbs her emotional equilibrium. Devi observes:

Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand. She had no choice really.... And she had won some small victory if you could call it by such a grand name. (95)

As compared to Mayamma, Sita's case is different. Unlike Mayamma, Sita came to her in-law's home with a determination to be a good wife and daughter-in-law on the basis of her talents; but she too, “Had paid the price for it, not a light one for someone who measured herself worth so completely in terms of music”(136).

To every woman, survival is of paramount importance. The three women characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* manage to survive by walking on a tightrope or playing a balancing act. Not succumbing to sorrow or despair, they do not commit suicide. They prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival. The parameters of choice have altered tremendously and Devi seems a beacon light for the modern Indian woman. This first novel by Githa Hariharan suggests immense possibilities for the world of modern Indian fiction.

Devi's desire for a career and her intellectual interest in Sanskrit texts are rejected by her husband. Mahesh is indifferent to love but wants sons. Devi's relationships with Dan, Mahesh and Gopal are centred on her sexual appeal. Thus, she always seems to be on the run in her endeavour to find some solace. Mahesh expected her to bear children. He takes her to a gynaecologist to set everything right with the help of sterilized instruments. The syringes and needles have their own language of torture for Devi.

Devi, Sita and Mayamma belong to three different ages, three different generations and are the possessors of three different levels of education, but the sufferings are almost the same. In fact, it seems that all the major characters are there only to tell that the female life is nothing but a tragic saga of sorrows because of the male dominance. All the females depart from their maternal house with their golden dreams about their coming life. But these dreams shatter as soon as their encounter happens with reality.

When Devi elopes with Gopal, a Hindustani classical singer and an occasional visitor to her neighbourhood, she knew she would not be happy with him. It is an act of penance, of protest against Mahesh and against her own self. As she herself predicts, the affair with Gopal proves to be a short one. He is a flirt with aspirations for an aristocratic way of life, Devi gets disillusioned with him and moves on once again. This

time she thinks she was certainly "no longer on the run" (138). Her life has come full circle with Devi choosing to come back to her mother to begin her life afresh: "To stay and fight, to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning" (139).

Mayamma, the old caretaker, narrates to Devi, her tale of tears and traumatic experiences as wife and daughter-in-law and how she came to be there in the family of Parvatamma, mother of Mahesh. She is married at the age of twelve to a useless gambler. When two years of marriage could not bring forth a child, her mother-in-law alleges her: "What kind of a girl is this... She eats as much as anybody else, but is barren. Her horoscope is lie, she will have to do penance to change its course" (80). The promises he made solemnly at the time of marriage are of no avail. They were forgotten words, valueless and uttered merely to follow tradition and conventionality. He promises:

Having taken seven steps with me, be my friend; be my inseparable companion. On the darkest nights, let our common path be lit by our lustrous love, Come, let us walk together, with this guiding lamp between us. (80)

Mayamma's mother – in – law used to feed her yesterday's rice considering it useless to feed fresh rice to a barren woman. When Mayamma was found admiring her new saree, her mother-in-law "pulled up the sari roughly just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly ground spices into her barrenness" (113).

Mayamma never questions these tortures nor does she grumble at these difficulties. She endures all of them as if they were her old friends. She never loses her strength. Mayamma undergoes a penance as her mother-in-law directs her to change the course of the horoscope. Her penance as DamodarRao suggests "takes multiple forms of response from self – pity to revenge and from self – inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustices" (165).

Mayamma after ten long years of penance is blessed with a son born on Diwali. After eight years of his birth, her husband "worn into middle age with dissipated excess, disappeared, taking with him all the money in the house" (81). Her mother – in – law feels that Mayamma is responsible for her son's disappearance. After that Mayamma never sees him again but she finds his cruelty in her son who starts bullying her: "At fourteen he threatened to beat his mother and sold her last pair of gold bangles" (81). He hits her with an iron frying pan when she refused to give him her diamond earrings.

There is no end for Mayamma's sufferings. First she bears with the torment and humiliation at the hands of her mother-in-law, then at the hands of her gambling husband finally at the hands of her own son. Mayamma's sensibility and tenderness are withered away as a result of her son's notoriety. "When he fell ill with a high fever, there was no tenderness left in Mayamma's hands. They were efficient, cool, but they withheld reassurance" (82). When he dies of fever, Mayamma clears out whatever was left in the house and burns "the horoscope with all the signs of luck on it, along with the body of her son" (82) and reaches to Parvatamma, who continues from then to be her mother, sister and daughter.

Mayamma, in spite of her painful married life, was able to serve this family restlessly. It symbolizes the innate strength of the woman who is able to come back to normalcy even after shocking troubles. Commenting on the plight of Mayamma J. Yellaiah and G.Pratima feel that, “Mayamma is typical Indian female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as was expected of her. She bore the brunt of cruelty that society had ordained for a woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and mother” (192). She represents the generation of Indian women who feel life is merely accepting and adjusting to one’s destiny without complaint by following the karma sutra. Women of her generation are meek, submissive, bound to the traditions of family and the institution of marriage. The foreign returned Devi undergoes the same humiliation that Mayamma, and illiterate village woman did a few decades ago. There are only technological variations. The modern women are humiliated through modern technology – smear, injection and fertility center, whereas Mayamma was compelled to suffer through penance.

CONCLUSION

Devi, Sita and Mayamma do not yield to the sufferings, sorrows and despairs. Indira Nityanandam opines that “They prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival. The parameters of choice have altered tremendously and Devi seems a beacon light for the modern Indian woman” (192). These three characters reveal a change in their outlook towards life representing their respective generations. As the time changed so the thoughts and perspectives of them also changed. Sita and Mayamma here represent the women who attempt to come to terms with their duties and surroundings whereas Devi emerges as an invulnerable individual and uncompromising survivor.

Devi does not want to be meek and submissive like Mayamma or her mother Sita. She rebels against the suppression of her individuality, identity and freedom and takes revenge like Kritya, Durga or Kali by walking out on Mahesh, her husband then elopes with Gopal, a musician and ultimately reaches her mother’s lap to start a new life. Thus Githa Hariharan portrays Devi as a new woman, who leads life from submissiveness to rebelliousness.

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