



DEMYSTIFYING THE TRADITIONAL MYTHS: A CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO
GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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ABSTRACT

India, a cradle of civilization having religious and linguistics variations, is a land of tradition and culture. Myths play an indispensable part in dissemination and transmission of tradition and culture from generation to generation. Indian writing in English is deeply rooted in Indian mythologies and legends. Though myths believed to present natural relationship between men and women, but are the powerful vehicles to carry the connotations of patriarchal ideology. Women writers especially the post-modernist not only look beyond the problems of love, sex and marriage but intentionally adopted 'myth' as a strategy to confront the preconceived notions of 'woman'. They resorted to the deliberate use of myth to decode the binary of patriarchal thought system which constructs a 'woman'. These women writers try to deconstruct the power structure involved in these myths and uncover the dark and mysterious side of these tools of literature. *The Thousand Faces of Night* which won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1993, the debut novel of Githa Hariharan who is instrumental in Supreme Court's judgment on Guardianship Act in 1999, devours the other aspect of these myths that involves gender dynamics.

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Myth, a new addition to the various literary devices, is very distinct, gives more of ambivalence, more suggestiveness, more expansion of meaning by saying so many things with so little. This tool enables the author to condense the past, present and future, being ubiquitous in time and place to decipher the latent and intricate psychic dispositions and deepest layers of collective mind, often divergent, sometimes even contradictory views simultaneously. It achieves its exciting, impressive and sometimes, even surprising effectiveness by "striking some very deep chord". The term, Myth, used in English is derived from the Greek word

"Muthos" meaning "Word" or "Speech". It is 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 to provide a rationale for social customs and observances. (Abrams 170)

The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms defines myth as:

Stories of unascertainable origin or authorship accompanying or helping to explain religious beliefs. Often (though not

necessarily) their subject is the exploits of a God or hero, which may be of a fabulous or superhuman nature, and which may have instituted a change in the working of the universe or in the condition of social life (146).

Like most stories, myths are an attempt to universalize human experience, and are rich repository of cultural heritage. Myth, as defined in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* "are specific accounts concerning Gods or superhuman beings and extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is altogether different from that of ordinary human experience" (793). Myths, transmitted from generation to generation, though both orally and written, encapsulate wisdom and knowledge, are the guiding force for human behavior besides providing icon for human society. Myth manoeuvres language in a unique way to portray the realities beyond comprehension, in metaphoric and symbolic language. As Mark Schorer points out,

Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is which has organizing value for experience. (Schorer 355)

Laurence Copupe in his book *Myth*, while referring to Don Cipitt's *The World to Come* defines the same as:

Myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance...It tells of the deeds of superhuman being such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts...although their powers are more than human and to next goften the story is not naturalistic but has the fractured, disorderly logic of dreams...we can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life...the individual finds meaning in his life by

making of his life a story set within a large social and cosmic story (5,6)

The myths which, being the repository of rich cultural heritage, believed to represent natural relationship between man and 'other', while in fact perpetrate "patriarchal norms and values that function within social contexts, concealing the conflicting interests which make up that particular socio-historical constellation" (Hasse 132). The famous French philosopher Roland Barthes declares myth as a 'theft of language' as the special trick of myth is to present an ethos, ideology or set of values as if it were a natural condition of the world, when in fact its no more than another limited, man-made perspective. A myth doesn't describe the natural state of the world, but expresses the intentions of its teller, be that a storyteller, priest, artist, journalist, filmmaker, designer or politician. The postmodernist writers especially women regards these mythical and literary discourses, not merely expression of social reality, but the carriers of male/ masculine ideology. Among these writers, Githa Hariharan is one such doyen, whose debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, a sensitive saga of women struggling to survive in a world of shattered dreams, won her 1993 Commonwealth Writers' prize.

Githa Hariharan articulates the themes pertaining to woman folklore with the help of Indian Mythology rather by its demystification i.e by devouring deep into the other aspect of it. She presents the Indian myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabhartta and explores the prescription of gender dynamics (politics) by means of Indian Mythology in the life of three woman characters-Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother, and Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook. The stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damyanti and others reflect on the life of these characters in the novel. In Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), the struggle of her women characters-Sita, Devi and Mayamma is a silent protest after being subjected to torture and neglect. Hariharan shows the Indian women has come a long way in her search for self.

Devi's grandmother, the oldest among all the women portrayed in the novel, though not directly involved in the novel's action and events, but makes her presence felt through her treasure of

myths and stories which Devi recollects throughout the book. The grandmother, though aged and belonging to a generation of woman-the submissive and docile "angel in the house", seems surprisingly individualistic and modern in her outlook. She deconstructs the ancient myths and legends loaded with male perceptions; her interpretations are quite modern, asserting the individuality of women as human beings, and appreciating and endorsing their resistance to oppression and subjugation and thus discarding the binaries of patriarchal thought system founded on women's oppression.

Devi, the protagonist is a modern Indian woman, educated abroad. When she goes to America for studies, she meets Dan, a black; a bond of friendship forged between them results into "approach romance, promises had been made in the dark shadows of the parking lot outside the grimy, friendly dinner, they met at." But Devi feels alienated in Dan's world: "he is an alien mirage, some barely remembered dream of clandestine passion" (Hariharan 3). Ripping apart her mother's vengefully constituted fortress "that shut out the rest of the world,... a secure womb" (Hariharan 13), Devi finds an escape route through grandmother's stories to dream, to fly, to tear, to shred the suffocating veils of femaleness. 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 with Nala. So she threw the garland around Nala's neck and espoused with him amidst all the intrigues made even by gods. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral, "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (Hariharan 20).

Sita, Devi's mother, well versed and adept in veena, had to sacrifice her immense talent in a masculine controlled regime. One day while playing veena, she could not hear her father-in-law that warranted "put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law" from him. In a momentary anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed in a whisper being "yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law" (Hariharan 30) not to play veena again. Sita, facing a horrible situation in a more

tradition bound society, suffers alone, internalized the anger ("I boil inside but don't show it") and expresses her protest with a vow.

She hung her head over the veena for minute that seemed to stretch for ages; then she reached the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They came out with a discordant twang of protest. (Hariharan 30)

In her self-destructive anger, she is the mythical Gandhari from the Mahabharata, who, in anger at being married off to a blind prince, had tied a bandage over her own eyes. Githa Hariharan, through grandmother's story, devours the hidden macho pattern of Gandhari myth- in dutiful wife and so- a true *arthanginni*; she views the situation differently. Grandmother sees Gandhari's reaction of blind folding herself as a sign of protest and expression of seething rage; "In her pride, in her anger Gandhari said nothing...lips straight and thin... with fury Gandhari was not just another willful proud woman... worthy of her royal blood"(Hariharan 29).

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. The grandmother feels Amba's pain at being rejected by Salva whom she loved, and being discarded at a time when she needed him the most. Despite subscribing to a traditional view that a woman needs to be respected, loved and looked after by her husband and family, grandmother is modern enough to say, in the absence of this, a woman has every reason to protest. In this way the grandmother eulogizes Amba as a crusader of woman's right as an individual; she is a female avenger who has been wronged, transforms her hatred and (after rebirth) rode to the battleground "with garland of Amba round his neck, he rode the plain of Kurukshetra to taste the heady sweetness of the beloved's blood in battle." (Hariharan 39)

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". Back home from America, 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 Mayamma. After marriage she finds that she, unexpectedly, has strayed 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 questions Mahesh about his work: "tell me about your work" (Hariharan 71). She asks him, "why did you marry me?". And was stunned by the reply "whatever people get married for" (Hariharan 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" (Hariharan 74). This emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba, a retired Sanskrit professor, an intellectual man. He narrates some stories to Devi like her granny; the stories of Baba are, "always have for their centre point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife" (Hariharan 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 her in laws house, her husband's long spells of absence, the lack of a proper companion, the death of her father-in-law and her clinically unproven infertility lure her to Gopal, a classical singer and a frequent visitor of her neighbor. Disillusioned, she discards marriage a social obligation; walks out of the wedlock and elopes with Gopal who comes in Devi's life raking embers buried in the ash of her hopes and dreams. But this breath of fresh air ends in a fiasco; the euphoria fades quickly and the illegitimacy of their relationship makes the matter worse. Devi's strife for space engenders in her a sense of void, loneliness and alienation that coerced her finally turns to her mother Sita. Once again she protests and asserts herself. Like Amba and Danyanti, she is

a warrior woman who "rode a Tiger, and cut off evil, magical demon's heads"(41). "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). 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 is Mayamma, the family retainer in Devi's father-in-law's house. She is portrayed as an ideal female character. Mayamma was twelve when she was married, "who rubbed her eyes and yawned as she leaved back in her father's lap" (Hariharan 79). The innocent childhood was nipped in the bud. She said, "I put away the shells, the smooth round pebbles I had played with in my parents' house. I took into my hand the iron skillet and blew the fire into the stove, even before my mother-in-law wake up" (Hariharan 116). With time the situation worsens; she "had to practice penance for her being barren. She dipped herself again and again in pure coldness, starved every other day, gave up salt and tamrind...meditated. Fed rice and curd to snakes; worshipped various gods and goddesses etc" (Hariharan 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" (Hariharan 81); Her husband deserted her when the son turns eight.

Broken emotionally, 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 dies" (Hariharan 82). To register her protest, "she burns her horoscope with her son" (Hariharan 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. The psyche of Devi and Mayamma inhibits the image of awe-inspiring Kritya “ a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted...Each age has its Kritya... each household shelters a Kritya”(Hariharan 69-70).

All the three women in the novel unite both the personalities-ferocious and sublime; like the ‘Goddess’ tried their utmost to brave the strong oppositions and design a room for their own in a hostile and deep rooted thought system of patriarchy.

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