

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

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

WHERE WOMEN ARE HONOURED, THERE THE GODS DELIGHT

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doi <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.148>



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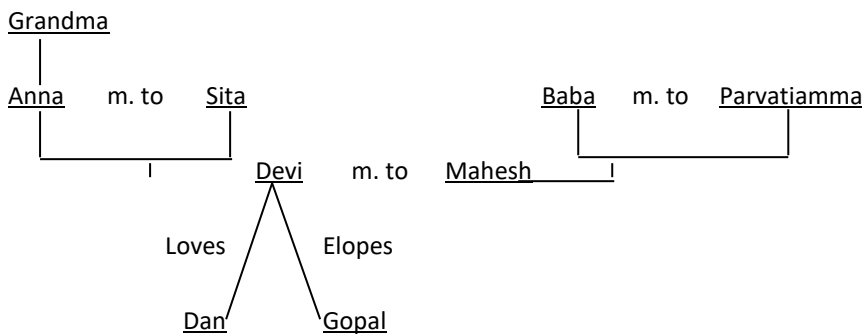
ABSTRACT

*“Yatra Narayastu Pujyante ramante tatra
DevataaH
Yatraitsu Naa Pujyante
SarvaastatraaphalaaH KriyaaH”*

The above quoted line in Sanskrit is a comment on women in Manusmriti, one of the most influential social texts of India. The line connotes that the divine are extremely happy where women are respected; and where they are not, all actions are fruitless. Githa Hariharan, in her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* finely crafts the treatment of Indian myths, lores and social reality concerning women. The myths on women, used by Hariharan, juxtaposed with modern social reality, give the readers an insight into the intricacies and complexities of the survival of women in India. One can find great sayings on respecting women and on providing equal status to them, only in India. The mythological figures of India, responsible for fabricating the holy social texts, have a lot to say on women. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, is deeply moved by the stories of Ganga, Gandhari, Amba, Kritiya, Damyanti, etc. narrated to her by her grandmother and her father-in-law. She is also vehemently stirred by the lives of her mother, Sita and her helper Mayamma, Myth, and reality, thus revisioned in three generations, play a vital role in igniting the turns of Devi's life. The lives of Mayamma, Sita, and Devi give a strong feminist compliment to the novel.

Keywords: myth, patriarchy, women, honour

Relationship among the characters in the novel



Mayamma: Maid at Mahesh's house

According to M. H. Abrams, "In classical Greek, 'Mythos' signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology- a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intensions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives." (170)

Again, Lee T. Lemon says, "Myth is used to refer to any imaginative but serious attempt for things they are..." (5)

India is a hive of diversely great tradition and heritage. The innumerable myths present in the religious and social texts, contribute to the rich ethnicity of India. India- the epitome of 'Unity in Diversity' has vibrant scholars and philosophers who have taught us the art of living. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the great epics of India, including the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* teach us the values and principles of life. Since, the paper centers on the feminist approach towards these traditional values and principles, I would like to concentrate on what these great epics and philosophical texts have to say about women and how they are reflected in the novel to be discussed. The Indo-Anglican woman fictionist, Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of the Night*, her debut novel, is based on a critical understanding of myth and lore. Githa Hariharan has tried to promote some traditional values and views on women and also criticizes some others. The novel, divided into three parts, depicts how the story of the protagonist, Devi, unfolds with all the decisions she takes being affected by the mythological stories narrated to her.

While Devi is being told stories by her grandmother, she is exposed to the different facets of Indian women through the legendary heroines in the epics of India. In these stories, the grandmother and Mayamma have made different concluding statements on women. These statements, in general, are subconsciously imprinted in the minds

of all the Indians that led to the marginalization and exploitation of women and also kindle the subaltern to fight for their status and equality. Contradicting the imposed derogatory status on women, these legendary heroines emancipated themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. When Devi recollects the stories of these mythical heroines, narrated by her grandmother, she makes a subtle comparison between the awe-inspiring lives of these heroines and the bitter lives of her and the women around her.

Marriage, being a social institution which ensures protection, love, compatibility and happiness, acts as the important cause for all the events in the play. While narrating the story of Damayanti's marriage to Devi, grandma states that, "a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (20). The word 'cunning' has always been associated with a negative trait. This statement on woman is very ambiguous in nature as the story of Damayanti does not evoke any sense of cunningness, but patience. Even though Damayanti was sure of her love for King Nala, she pretended to listen to the glory of other kings, who, mesmerized by the beauty of Damayanti, stood in an exciting anticipation to wear the garland from the hands of the princess. Devi, who lived in the fantasies of the dream world of prince and princess, weaved by the legendary heroines, did not find anything similar in her own life when she was presented before different people to be chosen as wife. Rather, in the process she was met with surprises and a feeling of guilt. Eventually, her marriage with Mahesh, who was frank and honest, was not her 'heart's desire'. Devi did not have a chance to play 'cunningly' as the society and her circumstances did not allow her to. Ironically, the society allows the men folk to play their part in a 'cunning' manner. They are allowed the liberty to choose and play. Satirically commenting on Damayanti's story and relating it with her own life, Devi expresses her disgust at the process of choosing a wife that left her frustrated, dejected, and bewildered. She says,

If I was going to play out a travesty of the myths that had filled my childhood, I would tear aside all pretence, I thought, I would be as-matter-of-fact as Mahesh (23).

In another episode of Gandhari, grandma comments that, "...my child, a woman meets her fate alone" (28). Gandhari, a significant character in *The Mahabharata*, was unaware of her husband's blindness. She was taken aback when she met with reality. Gandhari, in utter anger, vowed never to see the world; she covered her eyes with a thick red cloth forever. Grandma comments, "She embraced her destiny- a blind husband- with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood" (29). Gandhari's story is reflected in the life of Sita, Devi's mother. Sita was very much fond of playing Veena, and this love was trampled by her father-in-law of whose calls she could not hear as she was playing the Veena. Her father-in-law scolded her for being unable to summon to the duties of a house-wife and a daughter-in-law. Sita, in a momentary anger and frustration pulled out the strings of her Veena and vowed never to touch the instrument again. The lack of retaliation against these continuing injustices, the silent tolerance, and the sufferer's displeasure in accepting the fate, has been present since time immemorial. The statement had also some reflections in Devi's life. Devi, like Gandhari, was betrayed in many stages of her life. Her expectations from a marriage, from Mahesh were betrayed; Gopal, in whom she seeks love and affection, also betrays her feelings and emotions. Devi meets her destiny alone, abandoning everyone from whom she had expectations and thus comes running to her mother to start anew. Through the story of Gandhari, Devi comments:

The lesson brought to me five steps closer to adulthood. I saw for the first time, that my parents too were afflicted by a kind of blindness. In their blinkered world they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another. (29)

As Amba, one of the beautiful princesses of Kashi, was about to hold out the garland of Swayambara to her beloved young King of Salwa, she was abducted by a high-born prince, Bheesma, a latecomer, who was swaggering with the confidence of a winner. No one stopped him or came to her rescue, because, as Grandma says, "Once he had laid his manly hands on her shoulders, Devi, she was no longer a girl. A woman fights her battles alone"

(36). Amba revealed her secret love for the King of Salwa and pleaded Bheesma's stepmother to permit her to go back to the King. Astounded and speechless, they let her go. But, as destiny had something cruel saved for her, she was ruthlessly kicked out by the King of Salwa, because in his words, "I do not touch what another man has won in battle. Go to Bheesma... he is your husband" (37). But poor Amba, without any fault of her, was abandoned by Bheesma as well because he had vowed a life of celibacy. Her grandma comments, "A woman without a husband has no home" (38). This age-old trend of identity dependence on men has been stereotypically imposed on women. The identity of a woman has always rested, on her husband, debarring her from recognizing herself. The psyche of a woman has been so impregnated with these male-centric ideas, that they start believing the same. Bell Hooks has rightly put it in *Feminism is for everybody*, "Before women could change patriarchy we had to change ourselves; we had to raise our consciousness (7)". This incident ignited an insatiable desire for revenge in Amba, who had her rebirth as Drupada's daughter rose as a son. She was the sole reason for the death of Bheesma in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Thus, she was "a woman avenger who could earn manhood through penance" (38-39). Like Amba, Devi fights her battles alone. Inspired by her grandmother's stories, she becomes courageous and finally stops being a dithered woman. She takes the bold initiative of abandoning her husband Mahesh whose indifference towards her made her life miserable, and elopes with her lover, Gopal. This act of Devi places her as a courageous warrior who smashes the robust muscular pigeonhole attributed to women. She liberates herself from the social norms a woman is supposed to follow. Getting rid of her imposed identity, as her Baba puts, "by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens, (55) she takes the decision of eloping with Gopal. These bizarre heaven goals for women have made them to sacrifice their interests and most importantly, have led them astray from realizing their self worth. These illogical concepts have snatched away the basic human right of self-conditioning. Servitude to her husband has made every woman a slave. Devi, finally, sees the

vehement impacts on her life. She leaves Mahesh unserved, unattended and without a child. Due to long tours of her husband and total absence of physical attraction, Devi finds herself spending sleepless nights, aching for a "blissful numbness" (78). She finally decides, "I must learn to love" (78) and walks out on Mahesh. "I will walk on seeking a goddess..." (95) with so many examples and stories of penance for her. When she realizes the bitterness of men folk, she leaves Gopal as well. For Devi, the 'penance', here, is not for serving her husband and 'going out of the way', but for not being able to recognize the vitality of self, irrespective of gender. Betty Friedan in her *The Feminine Mystique* rightly says:

As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- "Is this all?" (15)

Women subjugation is a universal issue, irrespective of caste, religion, and nationality. The limitations set for women have been continuing all over the world since time immemorial. The stories, Mayamma and Baba had to tell, were all based on real life events, the only difference from that of the grandma's stories. While narrating the story of Parvatiamma, mother-in-law of Devi, Mayamma quotes Baba's observation on the sudden disappearance of his wife, "For a woman who leaves her home in search of a God, only death is a home-coming" (64). Parvatiamma was nowhere to be found after she had disappeared mysteriously from her home in search of spiritual solace. She had an ambition of following her heart's desire by abandoning the domestic responsibilities allotted to her. Baba had made quite a stereotyped observation, believing that a woman does not have any right to seek spiritual solace, and if one does, she meets her end. Parvatiamma somewhat refutes another statement of Baba:

The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in her expenses. Controlled in mind,

word, and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does. (70-71)

Baba is staggered by his wife's ambitious quest, beyond human relations. She has rejected the role of a householder, and in a way, by her non-conformist act; Parvatiamma has turned Baba's theories upside down. Women like Parvatiamma and Sita, frame their own kismet without letting the patriarchy affect them at all. Devi sees that the powerful choice of her mother-in-law is very different from that of her mother, Sita. Parvati's determination for spiritual fulfillment is a negation of motherhood. Her son, Mahesh, sees nothing but rejection and treachery in her peculiar quest. A mother seeking space of her own outside home is such an unimaginable and treacherous deed that his mother becomes a topic of taboo for him. Surprisingly, negation of motherhood is followed by negation of wifehood as Devi also rejects the role assigned to her and backs out from her responsibilities.

In the novel, the most important statement made by Manu, the great philosopher of India, on women is quoted by Baba. He says, "Where women are honoured, there the gods delight; where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless" (65). Devi's father-in-law resembles Manu in his attitude towards women. His stories of saints and their wives uphold the traditional Hindu concept of Dharma. This statement establishes the traditional age-old status assigned to women which has been dwindling since a long time. Hariharan, referring back to our ancestral observations on women, awakens the audience to the rich and glorious past of India, where the virtues and tradition demanded respect for women. Baba, in order to prove the statement made by Manu, refers to the story of Jayadeva and Padmawati. Jayadeva, one of the greatest Sanskrit poets of India, known for his epic poem, "Gita Govinda", filled the "cudjan" with the spontaneous lines wrought out of the spiritual trance he undergoes while singing the glory of Lord Krishna. One day, this spontaneity produced a line which broke his trance and as he could not harmonise with the very line, he stopped writing. The line was quoted by Baba:

Smara garala khandanam mama sirasa
mandanam

Dehi pada pallava mudaram... (65)

Baba translated this Sanskrit sloka, "Oh Radha... the poison of love has rushed up to my head. Only your tender, rose-coloured feet on my head will chase the poison down my body" (65) Jayadeva abruptly threw away his pen with a wavering mind and crossed those lines. He thought it impossible for Sri Krishna to put his head at Radhika's feet. That would transgress the principles of religion. He thought it to be sacrilegious. This depicts the degraded subconscious views on women present in the minds of men. It proves that a part of his conscious mind is too powerful, and it stands as a barrier even in his subconscious thoughts. Unable to accept the spontaneous utterance of the line proves the inability of the men folk to accord equal status to women. It is proved that Jayadeva has a discriminating, diminutive and spiteful attitude towards Radha because she is a woman. Astounded and stumbled, he got up from his seat and went for an oil-bath. Meanwhile, Lord Krishna came to Padmawati in her husband's guise, and restored the lines in the manuscript. When Jayadeva saw this miracle, surprised by the glory of his Lord, fell at Padmawati's feet because she had the fortune of witnessing Krishna, a blessing he had been denied. He realized that one can seek God only through love, not by devotion guided by rules and regulations, but a selfless devotion free from influences. We all know, "Love knows no bounds". Enlightened by the Lord, he, the, signs the manuscript as the husband of Padmawati. At this appreciating behavior of Jayadeva, Baba comments, "A great man can see the spiritual greatness of his wife" (65).

The story of Purandara Dasa and his noble wife, Sarasvati, narrated by Baba to Devi, arises a sense of realization regarding the important role played by women in men's life. Unlike his father, Purandara Dasa was such a miser that he balked at spending money for the treatment of his father's illness. His wife stood in stark contrast to him. One day, a Brahmin visited his shop who wanted some alms to perform the thread ceremony of his son. Dasa kept on putting him off. Without receiving any

help, he went to Dasa's wife, Sarasvati, who gave him her nose ring. The Brahmin promptly took the nose ring to Dasa's shop where he wanted to pawn it for money. When Dasa recognized it he sent a man to bring Sarasvati Bai's nose-ring. Stuck with fear, Sarasvati locked herself in the kitchen and tried to swallow poison. Miraculously, the nose-ring dropped from the heavens into her cup of poison and she was able to present it before her husband. Dasa was bemused by the magic he saw. He realized the futility of his miserliness. In gratitude for this event, he renounced his property and led a simple life. He later composed a song dedicated to his wife, for having shown him the path to God. Thus, Baba comments, "... it takes the wife's flame of dharma, to light within a man, the divine lamp that is rusting with neglect" (66).

The most interesting story which has a message of motherhood is about Ganga and Shantanu. Devi's grandmother says, "A mother has to walk strange and torturous paths" (88). On walking along the bank of Ganges, King Shantanu happened to meet a beautiful girl. He fell in love with her and in turn she promised to marry him, provided he did not intercept in her actions. However difficult, he accepted it. No sooner did she give birth to a child, than she killed it drowning in the river Ganges. She killed seven children. Shantanu could not approve such conduct and upon the birth of the eighth child, he could not refrain protesting her from drowning it. The lady goes saying, "Then take him, be the father and mother to him" (88). She plunged into the river. It was proved that King Shantanu married the Devi, not for her virtues but for her beauty and that it was his utter selfishness to marry her and to restrict her from drowning the babies. But, this story is very controversial in nature as humanity does not approve of taking lives. Here, King Shantanu's behavior is utterly pronounced as it is heart rendering for any human to witness such an inhuman act that involves cruel murders of innocent lives. This story also has a different end to it. According to some critics, an avoidance of the sufferings wrought out by the materialistic worldly trap of illusion reasons Ganga's ghastly act. Ganga's motherly love did not want her children to endure

the wretchedness life has to offer. Having known both the sides of this mesmerizing myth, it is up to the readers to come to their own conclusions.

In one of statements made by Devi, she says, "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" (89). The difficulties a mother faces are also reflected in the life of Sita, Devi's mother. Even though she married off her daughter, she is unable to retire from the filial duties towards her. She is worried about the discordant conjugal life of her daughter. She also deeply concerned of Devi's motherhood. In one of the letters to Devi, she writes:

All through the ages, my dear Devi... women have sought the deep content that comes with motherhood. When I held you helpless in my protecting arms, when you first smiled at my face bent over yours, when you lisped that precious word Amma, what vistas of joy appeared before me. (86)

At the end of the novel, it is seen that Sita is the one that rescues her daughter from the patriarchal politics. Being a daughter, Devi finds safety, peace and revives her true identity only in the lap of her mother who welcomes her with the soothing music of Veena. The powerful effect of motherhood rescues her from the disillusionment she had encountered while seeking love and attention from the men of her life.

The main character in the novel is Sita, Devi's mother. Sita is a woman who knows to mind, has clear visions on what she wants to achieve. Like the stray branches of the jasmine plants in her garden, she prunes the stray branches, thoughts, and actions in her life to achieve what she wants to. As a girl, her ambition was to become a great Veena player. She achieves that but silences her craving for music forever, when she pulls out the strings of her instrument when it come in the way of her being accepted as a good wife and a good daughter-in-law. The Sitas and Devis are very unlike the mythological characters of Sita and Devi. Sita of the novel is very firm in character and stops at nothing which could come in her way. Devi who carries the name of the great goddess, the goddess who vanquished demons as if they were flies, is a person without any

backbone. The only time Githa Hariharan's Devi exhibits any firmness of mind is when she gets into insensible relationships- once with Dan and the next with Gopal. Both the relationships are doomed to be nothing but temporary answers to the dilemma which Devi faces in her life- dilemma of not knowing what to do with it. And she feels, "My education has left me unprepared with the vast, yawning middle chapters of her womanhood." (54)

God made women and men. The only difference between them is biological. Carl Jung, in his *Psychology of the Unconscious*, talks about two concepts of "Anima" and "Animus"; where, "Anima" is the unconscious feminine side of a man and "Animus" is the unconscious masculine side of a woman. The amount of cultivation on this collective unconscious determines the behavior of a human being. But, due to the societal squeezing, this remains uncultivated and contributes to the woes of women. Githa Hariharan has revolted against the male dominated society and has depicted social reality in the multi-cultural society. The myths she has discussed in the novel clearly dictate that women should be honoured or else tragedy shall rise as its consequence. Hooks says, "Sexist thinking made us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly. Feminist thinking helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness (14)". She talks about Indian myths which are forgotten in this era of globalization. Our sophisticated lives made us renounce our heritage. On the whole, this novel is the retelling of the past. Thus she turns into the act of restoration of our lost Indian tradition of respecting women. It is very much evident in the contemporary Indian society that people often criticize these myths for having misled the society towards irrationality and conservatism, failing to acknowledge the genuinely value and moral based education they impart. It is the utter ignorance of the people of the true knowledge because there is hardly anyone who reads the scriptures without any prior biased opinions. In Hindu mythology, women have always been placed in a higher stature where mother is positioned higher than heaven. Hence, debunking the man-made patriarchal customs, one

should go back to the roots and find the true sense of survival that will consequently lead to the emancipation of the physically and mentally subjugated women of India and also to the restoration of their honour.

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