

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

MARRIAGE AS MIRE: DECONSTRUCTION OF PATRIARCHY IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S
THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

Dr. DEBASISHA PATI

Asst. Professor of English, KKS Women's College

Balasore, Odisha, India – 756003



Article Received: 07/07/2021

Article Accepted: 14/08/2021

Published online:23/08/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.119](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.119)

Abstract

Marriage in Indian society, broadly speaking, is looked upon as a sacrosanct institution. However, in heterosexual marriages, the male is privileged over the female. For long, it had appeared natural until feminism problematised it and discovered the ideology of patriarchy. Patriarchy is complicit in institutionalising marriage in order to perpetuate the unquestioned subordination of women to men. The sheer inequality between the two sexes is validated through marriage. It prescribes the ideal of self-abnegation for women to aspire to when what it seeks to achieve is their self-obliteration. Thus, marriage becomes mire for women. This paper is devoted to deconstructing the ideology of patriarchy, in an attempt to figure out how it has interpellated our age-old perception towards the institution of marriage. The phallocentricity of marriage shall be probed following the narrative in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

Keywords: Marriage, heterosexual, patriarchy, self-abnegation/obliteration, deconstruction, interpellate, phallocentricity

Marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always it annihilates woman.-*Simone de Beauvoir*

Githa Hariharan's award-winning debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) is widely acknowledged as her feminist foray into the issue of marriage. The novelist has problematised the institution of marriage. It is not looked at as a sacrosanct social institution validating the union of a man and a woman but as a patriarchal institution validating the inferiority of the female to the male. Marriage marginalises women in a phallocentric society.

The narrative tracks the journey of Devi, a US-returned Indian woman who discovers through the

maze of marriage what marriage does to women in the patriarchal society that India is. Marriage is the patriarchal seal on the slavery of women to men. Down the ages, in the name of bread-winning, men have had the privileged access to public arenas that grant them power, while women have been restricted to interaction on the home front. As a legal contract, and social institution, marriage maintains a great deal of power historically and contemporarily. Githa Hariharan claims that it impacts the psyche of the silenced sex to such an extent that they themselves start to judge their personal fulfilment through patriarchal parameters. Hers, therefore, is an artistic endeavour to focus on the changing perspectives of women and their growing awareness of and persistent efforts to break

away from the stultifying ideology. All the novels of Githa Hariharan reveal the long distance that Indian women have traversed, starting from subjugation and servitude to persistent protests and finally arriving at an assertion of their identity against the patriarchal society.

Githa Hariharan, primarily interested in the portrayal of women's woes, explores in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, what Millet means when she says: "There is no remedy to sexual politics in marriage" (Millet 147). This novel is yet another version of female novel of marriage in which the woman does not live happily ever after on getting married. Germaine Greer, in her *The Female Eunuch*, tells women that "to be emancipated from the helplessness and the need to walk freely upon the earth are your birth right", maintaining that "marriage is the chief cause of woman's helplessness and oppression" (Greer 53). Simone de Beauvoir has famously said:

The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Marriage is

the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution. (Beauvoir 451)

Marriage marks the beginning of the whole sacrificial project in which a woman's life is straitjacketed into serving the male. The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the keynotes of the cardinal problem of the conditioning of a girl child. In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could sell as an attractive commodity in the marriage market. Women often "become the victims of an ingrained social pattern because, right from childhood, a girl is conditioned to think of marriage as her main goal in life" (Dharkar 124). As J.S. Mill points out, "All women are brought up from the very earliest in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men, not self-will and

government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others" (Mill 232).

Like other girls, Devi is prepared by her mother 'for show' to be viewed 'as a potential bride' by the Srinivasans (*TFN* 16-17). The Srinivasans are, as the matrimonial ads specify, looking for a "fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared-to-adjust bride for their son". (*TFN* 17) What a woman goes through in her journey on the patriarchy-prescribed path, however, does not concern society. The novel foregrounds women's struggle against the erasure of their identity by the social apparatus.

Structurally, the novel has three parts. The first part introduces the protagonist caught in the dilemma between becoming a good girl, as her mother wants, following the norms of a traditional society or a bad girl shedding the traditional norms and leading her life on her own terms. It introduces Devi trying to shed her traditional Indian self on a North-American university campus and her life in India on her return from the US, in which she reverts to toeing the traditional line. Devi exhibits enough control compromising with her individuality agreeing to an arranged marriage. The narrative also takes us to, Devi's childhood, Devi's grandmother's house where Devi learns the rules of being a good girl. She does not pursue a career after her graduation from USA. In the US, she was with Dan but Dan's culture was totally different from hers and she felt like a stranger, unfit for Dan. She hears her culture calling. The good girl in Devi wins. She leaves her past life in the US and comes back to India to marry. Devi is tamed by memories of all the stories told by Grandma. A victim of her own imagination of herself as a *Devi*, she is trapped easily into a traditional marriage forgetting her past.

The second part explores Devi's life in an arranged marriage. Mahesh, Devi's husband takes her for granted. Devi is unable to adjust in the new atmosphere. She is unhappy, dissatisfied and lonely. Devi laments:

This then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in a lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and

demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood. (TFN 54)

According to Mahesh, marriage is a necessity, a social obligation that has to be fulfilled and it is the wife's duty to keep her husband happy by fulfilling his desires of the flesh. Mahesh fits into the description of Beauvoir when she says:

a man..views the bed as the proper terrain for asserting his aggressive superiority. He is eager to take and not to receive, not to exchange but to rob. He seeks to possess the woman to an extent over and above what she gives him; he demands that her consent be a defeat and that the words she murmurs be avowals he tears from her-demands that she confess her pleasure and recognize her subjection. (Beauvoir 725)

Devi soon she realizes that for Mahesh, there are no heroines in life, only wives and mothers. She is quick to see that if Dan is too un-Indian, Mahesh is too Indian. Devi feels cheated and slighted. Devoid of the much needed emotional sustenance which earlier she used to draw from her mother, she feels that marriage is a torture and it hangs like a knife above her neck:

I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife Would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, ...The games it plays with me are ignominious ... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (TFN 54)

To Devi's question, "Why did you marry me?" (TFN 54), Mahesh' reply is: "Whatever people get married for ... Thank God, we Indians are not obsessed with love."(TFN 54-55) Devi is defenceless against Mahesh's brazen confidence and superciliousness. Mahesh seems to be insensitive to the possibility of Devi possessing individuality and a personality that needs to express itself in a role other than that of a wife. When Devi wants to apply for the post of a research assistant, he discourages her: "What can

you do?" Mahesh asked, like a ruthless interviewer stripping away the inessential: "... You need at least one more degree for that. And what will you do when the baby comes?" (TFN 64-65) Instead of showing empathy for the cause of his wife's depression, he attributes her trouble to education: "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want?" (TFN 74)

The satiric tone of the novelist is quite obvious as Devi confesses about Mahesh's attitude towards her: "He is far too civilized to raise his hand and bring it down on my rebellious body. He snarls instead about women's neuroses and my faulty upbringing. (TFN 74) And her rebellion comes out in monologues punctuated with interrogatives:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors

every day?.. A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight? (TFN 74)

Thoroughly disenchanted with Mahesh and feeling utterly lonely, Devi looks forward to the company of her father-in-law, who again nurtures the 'good girl syndrome' in her and through his books of philosophy shows her the path of becoming a virtuous wife. Baba, 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. He invests so much confidence in woman and thereby assigns a great deal of responsibility to her. He says in a hypnotic voice:

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. (TFN 70-71)

He also firmly believes that 'by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens.'(TFN 55) Stifled by his philosophy, Parvatamma, his wife, had left the house in search of independent salvation. He is

baffled by his wife's quest beyond human relations. She rejected the role of a householder, and in a way, by her non-conformist act, she turned Baba's theories upside down. Devi sees that the power of choice of her mother-in-law is very different from that of her mother, Sita. Parvatiamma's spiritual choice is, in a sense, negation of motherhood. She asserts herself by shuffling aside her familial role. Her son, Mahesh, sees nothing but rejection and treachery in her peculiar quest. A mother seeking space for herself outside home is so unimaginable and treacherous a deed for him that his mother becomes a taboo topic for him.

The third part of the novel explores the other women characters of the narrative like Sita and Mayamma. Sita, is first seen as a cool, self-confident and middle aged woman who welcomes her daughter back from the U.S. She fits closely to Baba's description of the ideal womanhood. Sita, as her name implies, is an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She plays every move with dexterity 'Like a veteran chess player' (TFN 14) and answers every question "with expert counter attacks." (TFN 14) However, Sita, in her desire to become a goodwife and a perfect daughter-in-law, has trampled on her music and has destroyed the artist in her. Her desire could never be fulfilled, as a result of which she faces a sense of discomfiture and futility. She gives up playing the *veena* soon after her marriage because her father-in-law admonishes her for neglecting her duties and commands her to, "put that *veena* away" and asks her if she is "a wife, a daughter-in-law?". She passively declares: "Yes I am a wife, a daughter-in-law" (TFN 30). She saw her femininity as an illusion and so she "seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of her soul till the enticing stems of the seven-noted scale, came apart, broken and disharmonious in a cluster of pathetic twangs" (TFN 105).

Devi sees the parallel between the lives of Gandhari and that of her mother. Her mother also acknowledges this fact when she says: "Gandhari's anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine." (TFN 29) Just as Gandhari's blind folding is an act of protest and self-denial, Sita's decision to discard the *Veena* too is an act of both vengeance and self-

abnegation. It is, no doubt, loss of her autonomy. Vengefully, as it were, she subverts the role assigned to her and emerges as the head of the family. She is no longer an oppressed wife and daughter-in-law as she inflicts control on her husband and powerlessness on her daughter. Sita is aware that her marriage is devoid of passionate love. Still she is prepared to do anything to protect her marriage. Very deftly and without creating any scene, she nips off her husband's advances towards young Annapurna, her orphaned distant cousin, who comes to stay with them: "Amma, wise and jealous, a bitch guarding her own, saw it first ... she crushed it ruthlessly." (TFN 77) Devi, however, knows that even women like Sita who achieve their goal of wifehood and motherhood with a single-minded devotion to it, have to have their share of painful sacrifices. Sita has to give up her first love, Veena, and dreams of genius and fame, and cut herself off from the link with the past in order to be a perfect house keeper, a blameless wife.

In the patriarchal set-up a woman's status is relegated in favour of man. Similarly, Mayamma's tale of woe is not much different from the tales of women in general. Her suffering "exemplifies the inflexible constraints that identify a woman with the undesirable attributes of 'dependence', 'passivity' and 'masochism'" (Nair 77-78). She suffers by a tyrant husband who hurts her. Conditioned strongly in her feminine role, she attributes her sufferings to her fate. She stoically submitted to the patriarchal values according to which women are "to be mere 'dolls' for men. Men mostly prefer doll-like girls who never ask question for any of their ideas or actions" (Alison 25). Mayamma suffers psychological and physical violence. Her husband hits, slaps, kicks, beats and indulges in non-consensual sexual activity. Unable to bear a child, her agony is intensified by her indifferent husband who "woke her up every night, his large, hairy thighs and heavy on her, pushing, pushing" (TFN 80). Once reminded of a song her mother used to sing, she was humming the tune while making a *kolam*. Her husband, back after a night of whoring in the rain indicts her saying, "so you've taken to singing in the streets, have you, you shameless hussy" and punishes her with "a well-aimed kick on my bent bottom." (TFN 111)

Mayamma represents the generation of Indian women who accept their fate, without complaint by following the karma sutra. Bound to the traditions of family and the institution of marriage, they live and die looking upon the values set out for women to adhere to as being sacrosanct, not as the product of patriarchal politics.

In the novel, the stories of alluring, self-sacrificing, and avenging goddesses of the Hindu pantheon serve as a backdrop to the triple narrative. Fed by her grandmother's stories of palaces, heroic women, self-sacrificing heroines and women turning into men, Devi realizes that she can relate neither to the aggressive model nor to the benevolent model of femininity. Due to long tours of her husband and total absence of physical attraction, Devi finds herself spending sleepless nights, aching for a 'blissful numbness' (TFN 78). She finally decides: "I must learn to love" (TFN 78) and walks out on Mahesh: "I will walk on, seeking a goddess ..." (TFN 95) with so many examples and stories of penance before her. When Devi's barrenness reduces her place in the family she is attracted towards Gopal, a Hindusthani classical singer and an occasional visitor to her neighbourhood.

Devi seeks liberation in adultery, the only escape from her lifeless confinement. She flees from her 'unconcerned' husband Mahesh and elopes with the seemingly concerned lover, Gopal. She becomes a muse for Gopal and stays with him for some time but still feels trapped. She finds herself to be a reflection of her partner's self-image. For Gopal, women appear superficial since they require a man to provide them with a meaning. The only identity a woman has, according to him, is to be a man's wife or his child's mother. He is surprised at Devi who refuses to be a mother. He says: "You look so fragile, so feminine ... It's hard to believe that you don't want a child." (TFN 93) Gopal's music means to him what the yearning for a descendant had meant to Mahesh. He serves as the deliverer for Devi caught up in an illusion of womanhood. But the moment he takes off his mask, Devi discerns that Gopal is no better than Mahesh. It seemed to her that Gopal was as wedded to his music and concerts as Mahesh was to his job. Devi finally realizes:

I was always greedy for good fortune. Foolish girl. I dived into the water ... I found that perfect hyacinth. But as I hung on to it with all my strength, it dragged me down into muddy, violet swamp. (TFN 112)

Devi thinks that her walking out of Mahesh's life is her first real journey. But in the wake of her disappointment with Gopal, she decides to run no further but to return to her mother for a new lease of life.

Githa Hariharan's women not only question the system, but they are bent upon paving new paths and breaking new grounds and finally they create a world for themselves where they seek the companionship of another female. Hariharan has explored in this novel the efficacy of female bonding as women's answer to the dominant patriarchal ideology. An important expansion of nurturing and care giving is the woman-woman dyad, also called female bonding, which helps in female identity formation. The formation of identity blends with attachment felt for their mothers. Hence, the mother-daughter and woman-woman bonding becomes a growth-fostering medium with empathy as an important nutrient.

If patriarchy pushes women into the mire of marriage, female bonding pulls them out of it into a meaningful existence that they live on their own terms. *The Thousand Faces of Night* thus remains the gripping account of a woman's quest for a self-image. Having failed to define her identity as a wife or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns to her mother, "... to stay and fight, to make sense of it all ..." (TFN 139) and to start from the scratch. It is in her relationship with her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself. We may conclude with Urmila Verma who pays a rich tribute to the novelist when she says: "It is a prophetic voice, announcing the emergence of a new identity." (Varma 104)

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M Harshley. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- Dharkar, Rani. "The Victim/Wife Figure in the Texts of Shashi Deshpande". *Victim Consciousness*

-
- in Indian – English Novel*. Ed. Usha Bande.
Jalandhar: ABS Publication, 1997. Print
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London:
HarperCollins, 1970. Print.
- Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New
Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992. Print.
- Mill, J.S. *The Subjection of Women*. Web. 15 Dec.
2014.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1970. Web. 20 Aug.
2011.
- Nair, Rama. "The Art of Fiction: A Note on the
'Prelude' of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand
Face of Night". *The Indian Journal of English
Studies*. Vol.XXXIII.1994-95: 76-80. Print.
- Varma, Urmila. "Satire as a Mode of Expression in
Gita Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of
Night." *Indian Fiction of the Nineties*. Ed. R.S.
Pathak. New Delhi: Creative, 1997. 100-04.
Print.
-