REVISITING INDIAN MYTHS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*. A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

India is a museum of language, culture and Indian English Literature is an expression of its people, their culture, traditions and, their ways of life. Culture is defined as common belief shared by a large group of people belonging to a particular region; is passed from one generation to other. It is set of manners, customs, practices and morals, and norms. Stories based on traditions are called Myth. They are sacred tales that explain the world and human experience and play fundamental role in society. The Present research study examines the interplay of mythological stories of *Gandhari, Damayanti, Amba* and how Githa Hariharan links these mythological characters with fictitious characters as portrayed by her in *The Thousand Faces of Night.*

Keywords

Culture, myth, liberty, patriarchy, society.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English Novelists are writing in the most complex phase of Indian society and culture. With the continuous advances and changes taking place in society, the identity of an individual in general, essentially that of a woman is changing radically. The women novelists are recognized for the originality and indigenous flavour of soil that they bring to their work. A growing number of novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Nayantara Sehgal,

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Manju Kapoor, Namita Gokhale, and many others have questioned the culture where identity and individualism have been unheard of by the female genders.

"*Their writings reveal the problem in the relationships between urban and educated men and women in modern Indian society where freedom has given women a chance to fulfil their desires, but due to several conscripting attitudes of the society this newly gained freedom causes terrible pain in their lives. Men women in the Indian Society do not have the same kind of freedom to express themselves. Women are still greatly dominated by men and the society in general.*" (Ghosh, 21)

According to Merriam-Webster custom is defined as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group." As per T.S. Eliot, there are three ways of regarding culture, as that of the individual, of a group or class, and of a whole society'. The culture of a whole society comprises urbanity or civility, learning in all branches, philosophy, and the arts. Culture is something alive and its effects are seen in the whole society. Myth 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)

A group of people living in a community that share the same culture is called society. It consists of people and institutions around us, our shared beliefs and our cultural ideas

The Thousand Faces of Night: A Critique

The story of the novel deals with three women Characters-Devi, the Central Character; Sita, her mother, and Mayamma, the maidservant. The three women belong to three different generations but their status in society has not very changed. They struggle hard for their identity, self-respect. Devi is a young girl who graduated from abroad suddenly she is brought into the system of arranged marriage yet she tried to fulfil all the requirements but failed. Sita is the mother of Devi, a well-grown woman who has given all her life to the husband and well-being of the family. Mayamma is a maidservant

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at Devi's in-law house. She is the most victimized, exploited woman who was cheated by her husband, mistreated by her mother-in- law, left by her son.

The stories of Gandhari, Damayanti, and others in the life of these characters and their intervention with others in the novel. The novel established the relationships which originate out of the emotional needs of human beings coming in contact with one another around them.

"Githa Hariharan's feminism is based on understanding of myths and lores. She has given a finest treatment to the myth and reality in Indian social life." (Feminist Perspective in Githa Hariharan's Novels, 28)

As a young girl, Devi inquisitively tries to know the mystery of life and during her childhood, her grandmother told her several stories.

According to the Indian social setup, marriage is considered a traditional role of women. Devi is not interested to marry, but she accepts the proposal for not hurting the feelings of her mother. The mother "*weaves a cocoon a secure womb"* (Githa Hariharan,13).

Devi recollects her grandmother's story of *Damayanti* that was taken from the *Mahabharata. Nala,* the king of *Nishad* was brave, handsome, and virtuous. *Damayanti'*s father decided to hold her *Swayamvara*.

Damayanti was brave and determined to espouse Nala. So, she threw the garland around his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the gods.

Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral, *"A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning"* (Githa Hariharan, 20). The story of Nala- Damayanti fascinated her. From this story, Devi established the concept of *Swayamvara*.

The next story narrated by her grandma is about Gandhari who plays a significant part in the Mahabharata. Gandhari was married to a very rich prince, whose Palace was "twice as big twice as magnificent as her parents Palace" (Githa Hariharan, 28). On all the ways he is very rich and "the Marble Pillars Shone like Mirrors". (Githa Hariharan, 28) Whereas on meeting her husband for the first time in such a rich palace, she was taken aback for "The White eyes the pupils glazed and useless" (Githa Hariharan, 29).

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Gandhari in anger vowed never to see again the world; so, she bound her eyes with the help of a veil. Summing up the story Devi's grandmother says: "*she embraced her destiny--a blind husband with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood"* (Githa Hariharan, 29).

Through this story Devi learned life through her grandmother's choice of Gandhari and acclaims:

"The lesson brought me five steps close 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". (Githa Hariharan, 29)

Gandhari's story once again reflected the life of Sita., Devi's mother. Before Marriage, she likes to play the veena. She entered her husband's house with a veena as part of her dowry. After completing the household affairs, which was considered as the foremost duty of the housewives, she used to play the veena. One day her father-in-law called her for performing some works before puja in the morning. She could not hear, as she was playing the veena. The father-in-law scolded Sita. *"Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law"?* (Githa Hariharan, 30)

In a wave of momentary anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play the veena again and replied in a whisper*: "yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law"* (Githa Hariharan, 30). Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of their husbands or children and felt safe in their confinement. This very confinement has made them slaves. They are the victims in the hands of the patriarchal structure. Githa Hariharan's women characters are trapped between tradition and modernity and have become the victims of gross gender discrimination of the male-dominated society.

So, the stories are part of the culture in India. They play an important part in teaching and making of a person's ideology. The novelist presents the Brahminical order since caste and custom pervade India. Devi's stay in the U.S. makes it impossible for six prospective grooms to accept Devi as a wife. Marriage is a sacred and important custom. Devi recalls her grandmother's stories at the time of her marriage. Devi's grandmother narrates stories from

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Ramayana and Mahabharata that include an ideal woman who follows the footprints of her husband. In Devi's grandmother's stories, there are only heroes and heroines, the sun shines brightly and everything is splendour. Devi is happy that her grandmother is not active to see her wedding. She declares, *"*I am glad she is not here to see me at my *Swayamvara*, the princess robe she lovingly stitched for me frayed round the edges and two sizes too large*"* (Hariharan1992, 20).

"The Thousand Faces of Night is a unique example of such narration. The myth and reality in Githa Hariharan's novels form her unique tradition of the complex issues of women. Her able thinking echoes a new voice and new awakening coming in the world of women. It seems that she has carefully studied feminism and feminist movements in contemporary India and has treated these complex issues in a careful style. She is anticipating the arrival of 'New Women' in the new millennium on Indian horizons in a bold manner. The problem faced by new women has been described by Githa Hariharan by pin-pointing different facets of myth and reality." (Feminist Perspective in Githa Hariharan's Novels, 31-32)

Concluding Remarks

Indian Writing in English has been acclaimed around the world for its innovation, radically new approaches to the art of storytelling. Devi 's grandmother's narration is a kind of revisionist myth-making in its own right: she does not dwell on the more prominent figures like *Savitri Anushuya* often celebrated as paragons of female virtue.

The notion of making one's own choices is discussed through the stories of Damayanti, *Gandhari*, the protagonist's mother, Sita, and the protagonist herself. The first story of the grandmother is of princess *Damayanti* who gets her heart's desire despite all the efforts made by gods to make her select one of them instead of King *Nala*.

When Devi wanted to know why she pretended to listen to other Kings when she wanted to marry King *Nala.* Grandmother said "*Because a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning. "* (Hariharan 20).

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As even if a woman is free to make her choices, she has to be on guard and see if she is not being cheated out of her rights. While playing in the house once Devi found her mother's photograph holding a *veena* in her hands. The grandmother mentions the whole story of Sita and the veena playing incident. But before telling the reason she told her the story of *Gandhari* from the great epic the *Mahabharata.* After finding how the truth about her husband's blindness was hidden from her, in her fury, she makes a vow and tears off a piece of cloth and ties it over her eyes for the whole life. The grandmother comments on it "*Gandhari was not just another wilful, proud woman, she embraced her destiny a blind husband with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood"* (Hariharan 29).

Later grandmother tells the story of Devi's mother, Sita; was also a dutiful wife. Once seeing *pooja* room in a disarray her father-in-law got furious and shouted at her to stop the practice. She pulled stings out of the wooden base. It was her way of protest. To prove that she was a dutiful wife, she stopped playing *veena* forever. Grandmother does not make any comment on it but leaves it for Devi to conclude: It was not being dutiful but a way of rebelling against the social nature of domesticating a woman. It's a strange kind of rebel, but there is anger in it. Devi's grandmother is her first teacher. She skilfully narrates the stories from the past of *Gandhari, Amba, Damayanti* to her. These stories act as a Prelude to womanhood and develop a strong foundation of morals to Devi's personality. Through these stories, she develops a vision of women's fate. Devi's choices in life in the words of Indira "Devi, who is a modern feminist. Though she lacks the will to choose and her early decisions are faltering. We note development in her character. Initially, she quits the U.S.A leaves behind Dan because of A sense of filial piety, marries Mahesh as a good daughter should attempt to be full-time. Mahesh as a good daughter should attempt to be a full-time wife and House maker as an Indian Pativrata should. Gradually she shows her resolve in waking out with Mahesh and even greater determination in waking out on Gopal." (40)

"*Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night a significant contribution to women studies. It is a Mahabharat of feminism. She exploits*

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the rich reservoir of our collective consciousness by peeping into the psyche of mythical characters specially the women victims. She tries to link them to "our lives" ...Gandhari, Damayanti, Amba are brought with their dignity intact. They don't belong to distant past; one has to look around identity them." (Changing Faces of Women in Indian Writing in English, 135)

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