

## DECODING THE MYTHS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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### ABSTRACT

*The discourse of mythology is male-centered, as mythological stories represent acts of masculine vigor while women remain docile puppets, playing victims or mute observers. The frequent use of myth and legends has provided the scope to read Githa Hariharan's debut novel for the purpose of exploring the role of myth in constructing and re-visioning gender and issues related to gender. The author presents the Indian myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabharata and relates them to the women characters of her novel. The story of The Thousand Faces of Night revolves around three women characters – Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the maid. As a young girl, Devi curiously tries to know the mystery of life through the stories told by her grandmother. Hariharan's novel is constructed from a blend of myth, legend and religious parable, which overlays a realist narrative that is also informed by autobiography and personal memory. The stories of Pati, Baba and Mayamma have been taken from ancient myths, inscriptions from the laws of Manu and the real stories of lived experiences respectively. Devi's grandmother Pati illustrates the role of women in disseminating the traditional stories from one generation to another which is the way patriarchal ideology is promulgated. My readings of Hariharan's use of myth illustrates how it continues to endorse a dominant ideology through stories and allegories of selflessly devoted women but it also creates spaces in which the traditional mythology can be read against the grain, offering the possibilities of a transformative gender politics.*

Women have been written within fixed forms of gender stereotypes by patriarchy, and it has been kept alive by mythology. The assigned role-play extended itself in literary presentation and ultimately penetrated into real-life affiliations too. Women writers resist representations of such ideological influences. There is a different tradition of women's writing that aims at re-reading patriarchal myths which form the very basis for marginalizing one half of humankind.

The discourse of mythology is male-centered, as mythological stories represent acts of masculine vigor while women remain docile puppets, playing victims or mute observers. They have no representation of feminine verve or female valor. Feminist writers have been concerned with the complete absence or negative portrayal of women in literature. Therefore they seek to re-read patriarchal myths. In this process, they represent women from women's point of view and tend to rewrite the literary canon. The frequent use of myth and legends has provided the scope to read Githa Hariharan's debut novel for the

purpose of exploring the role of myth in constructing and re-visioning gender and issues related to gender.

Myths can be dated back to the beginning of human civilization. The New Encyclopedia Britannica defines myths thus: "Myths 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). 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). Myths attribute meanings to customary practices and traditions and literature borrows its raw material from the immediate surroundings of human life. It is believed that myths represent "natural" relationships between men and women; while in fact, these perpetuate "patriarchal norms and values that function within specific social contexts, concealing the conflicting interests which make-up that particular socio-historical constellation" (Hasse, 132). Though literature often borrows stories from various cultural myths, feminists have deployed patriarchal myths in their works so as to reconstruct and recreate myths to contest problems of domination and gender inequality. Even now when these writers re-represent the women in their postmodern narrative in postmodern era, the patriarchy demands acceptance and conformity which is well depicted in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

The author presents the Indian myths taken from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and relates them to the women characters of her novel. In Indian traditional family system, these myths are verbally and orally transmitted from one generation to another generation in order to "establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (Abrams, 170). The issue of the conditioning of feminine gender is brought to the fore by Hariharan in the very beginning of the novel. Jyoti Singh, in her insightful study of Indian women novelists from a feminist and psycho-analytical viewpoint, comments in this regard:

The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the keynote of the cardinal problem, that is, the conditioning of the girl child. Women, especially mothers and grandmothers, show concern in encouraging their daughters to follow the stereotypes. The myths of Parvati, Sita and Savitri are built up and repeated to promote the traditional images of women – which leads to selfless behavior and in turn, to insensitivity and injustice. (36)

The story of *The Thousand Faces of Night* revolves around three women characters

– Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the maid. As a young girl, Devi curiously tries to know the mystery of life through the stories told by her grandmother. Everyone gains knowledge from, as Sigmund Freud says, "Widely different sources, from fairy tales and myths, jokes and witticisms, from folklore . . . saying and songs of different people and from poetic and colloquial usage of language" (166). As

Devi returns to Madras after studying in the U.S. for two years, she is overwhelmed by memories of the stories from Hindu mythology told by her grandmother, Pati. Meanwhile, her mother, Sita, arranges her marriage to an ambitious young man Mahesh. At this point Devi recollects her grandmother's story of Damayanthi that was taken from the *Mahabharata*. Damayanthi's father decided holding her swayamvara. Damayanthi was brave and determined to espouse Nala, the brave, handsome and virtuous king. 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" (20). The story of Nala- Damayanthi fascinated her. From this story Devi establishes 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" (28). But on meeting her husband for the first time in such a magnificent palace, she was taken aback for she had been married to a blind man. 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" (29). Devi 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" (29). Gandhari's story also reflects the life of Sita, Devi's mother. Before marriage, her parents had taught her to play 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 veena. One day her father-in-law called her for performing some works before puja in morning. She could not hear, as she was playing veena. The father-in-law scolded Sita: "Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (30). In anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play it again and replied in a whisper, "Yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law" (30).

Another significant story told her by her grandma deals with a beautiful girl who married a snake. Although Devi's immature mind cannot decode the real purpose underlying the story, it etched in her memory as a story throughout her life. A childless couple prayed to God for a child and in return a snake was born to them. When the snake grew up, his father planned its marriage. He walked to the distant lands in search of a bride. When the host learnt that the man was in search of a girl for his venom-tongued son who was in the shape of a snake, he readily offered his gorgeous daughter. The girl on seeing the snake as her husband, whole-heartedly accepted her lot, saying "A girl is given only once in marriage" (33). One night the serpent came into her room and spent a night with her. Next morning when she woke up, surprisingly she found a handsome young man lying on her bed. Devi co-relates the story with the lot of the maid, Gauri.

As the grandmother grows older, stories also take a new shape. "The grandmother's stories became sharper, more precarious tone of dangerous possibilities" (35). This time grandmother dwells upon *Mahabharata* for a story and she talks about Amba. Prince Bhishma goes to

theswayamvara of three beautiful princesses: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Amba, the eldest, chose King Salva and garlanded him. But suddenly Bhishma kidnapped all the three princesses and took them to his step-mother. When they came to know that Amba had already married, they let her go to King Salva. Unfortunately Salva refused to accept her and insulted her, “Do you think I feast on leftovers? I am a king. I do not touch what another man won in battle. Go to Bhishma. He won you when his arrow struck my eager heart on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me?” (37). Insulted Amba went back to Bhishma, who also refused to accept her. Thus she changed her attitude towards life and vowed to avenge Bhishma. She went to the forest and did penance to please Lord Shiva. Having been pleased with her penance, Lord Shiva gave her a garland and promised her: “Whoever wears this garland will surely kill Bhishma” (39). This story rears a brave attitude in Devi. “She day-dreamed more and more about female avengers” (40). These lessons indelibly imprint themselves in her mind. She confesses, “I lived a secret life of my own; I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut off the evil magical demons heads” (41). The most interesting story which has a message of motherhood is about Ganga and Shantanu. She says “Motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast” (88). On walking along the bank of Ganges, King Shantanu happened to meet a beautiful damsel. He fell in love with her and in turn she had promised to marry him, provided he did not intercept her in her actions. However difficult, he accepted it. No sooner did she give birth to a child than she killed it drowning in river Ganges. She killed seven children. Shantanu could not approve of such conduct, but he remained silent for holding up the vow. Upon the birth of the eighth child, he could not refrain protesting her from drowning the child. The lady went back to her normal form – river Ganges, saying, “Then take him, be the father and mother to him” (88). She plunged into the river. There is a belief in the Hindu mythology that the water of Ganges purifies us of our sins for it flows from heaven. The lady plunged into the river to wash away her sins. After many years Devi could interpret the story and concludes, “To be a good mother, to be a mother at all . . . you have to renew your wifely vows everyday” (88).

After marrying Mahesh, Devi meets her father-in-law Baba and the caretaker-cum-cook in that home, Mayamma. Emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba. Her relationship with Bababe comes stronger. He was a Sanskrit professor, an intellectual man. He narrates some stories about womanhood, and the wifely vows and duties in a household. Baba talks about Manu, who is the creator of Hindu code of conduct. He teaches Devi what Brahminhood is. He tells Devi quoting from Manu, “A Brahmin . . . shrinks from honors as from poison; humility he covets as if it is nectar” (52). Devi feels glad to be a disciple of such an intellectual man. Baba used to hear the Carnatic music. He talks about the *ragas* and *kritis* with Devi. He narrates the life history of Muthswamy Dhikshidhar, one of the greatest composers of Carnatic music. Githa Hariharan arranged the episode as a tribute to Muthuswamy Dhikshidhar and to the Carnatic music. Not only does he narrate about Muthuswamy Dhikshidhar, but also narrates about Jeyadeva who brought out *Gita Govindaa* composition on “Krishna’s all-encompassing love” (65). He also talks about his resolution to lead a simple and austere life. The boredom and emotional emptiness of her childless married life is temporarily



relieved by her affinity with her father-in-law. In Baba's absence Devi is introduced to the bleak subaltern histories of real rather than mythologized women, recounted by the aging family maid Mayamma. Haunted by these diverse stories of women, which are in fact bound by common themes of endurance, Devi is poised between a position of acceptance and resistance. She finds brief solace and the illusion of fulfillment, in a love affair with the charismatic and egotistic musician, Gopal. The novel concludes with the ambivalent image of Devi's return to her widowed mother's house.

## DECIPHERING THE STORIES

Hariharan's novel is constructed from a blend of myth, legend and religious parable, which overlays a realist narrative that is also informed by autobiography and personal memory. The stories of Pati, Baba and Mayamma have been taken from ancient myths, inscriptions from the laws of Manu and the real stories of lived experiences respectively. Devi's grandmother Pati illustrates the role of women in disseminating the traditional stories from one generation to another which is the way patriarchal ideology is promulgated. In the novel's opening, Devi recollects her grandmother's constant recourse to legend as a means to receive those answers gently but now she is able to contextualize the stories and identifies a specific purpose invested within them. Devi realizes that her present conscience has been deeply embedded with her myth-laden past. As Krishna Sen points out, these resources (myth) may be read as "gendered (not religious) subtexts, each one emblematic of a specific tendency in a woman's choice and action" (Sen, 172). Pati's stories consist of heroes and heroines taken from the epics of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the Vedic myths. These are tales in which "princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending" (20). Devi's suppressed memories about predestined husbands and idyllic marriages reassert themselves as she goes through the process of "swayamvara" managed by her mother. One afternoon Pati told Devi the story of "how the beautiful princess Damyanti got married"

(18). As she speaks, she feeds Devi portions of jackfruit, the "cloying sick-sweet smell turned my stomach, but she had taught me the pleasure of biting into this thick, succulent flesh" (18). The juxtaposition of the images conveys effectively the subtle process of indoctrination, through which women are taught to conform to the bitter-sweet role of a constructed femininity.

The inquisitive child interrupts the grandmother's stories with pertinent but poignant questions which disrupt and twist the narrative. Pati's replies reveal how the older woman rationalizes women's experience of life within a specific cultural context when she defines a nymph as a "woman who is very beautiful and never has children . . . that is why she remain a girl" (18). Thus making an implicit reference to motherhood as defining attribute of femininity, Pati reinforces the mystification of the courtship and the wedding rituals with her assertion that everything about bride is a secret. She kindly but misleadingly assures Devi that she also will be pampered and cosseted into a "pale, pale princess" (19). Here she naturalizes the desire for a traditionally coveted pale complexion more

commonly found in the north of India than their native South. While this is illustrative of the gap between mythology and lived experience, it also suggests that myth discursively subsumes race and gender. Pati's story of Damyanti is centered on the magical splendor of the *swayamvara* and does not extend to the hardships and sacrifices endured by Damyanti in her marriage to Nala, owing to his penchant for gambling.

Rather than tales of heroic gods and goddesses, Baba's stories talk about the duties and responsibilities assigned to gender and caste. These are seeped into bitterness that originates from his failure to keep his wife in accordance with the patriarchal narratives and tenets of religion. His vocation as a professor of Sanskrit lends him an air of wisdom and gentleness that draws Devi to him. She observes that his stories are less ambiguous than those of her grandmother. Pati's stories were "a prelude to womanhood, an invitation into its subterranean possibilities" whereas Baba's "define the limits" (51). Baba's stories are functional in purpose. Devi recognizes that they "always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife", and she notes how his judgments are verified by laws of Manu (50). His teachings reiterate the teachings of the *Manusmriti*:

The path a woman must walk to reach heaven . . . is a clear, well-lit one . . . by serving her husband, she is honored in the heavens. On the death of her husband, the chaste wife established in continence, reaches heaven, even if childless (55).

The central characters of *The Thousand Faces of Night* do not suffer the brutality of rape but gender violence resides as an undertone in the novel and as a physical reality for the maid Mayamma. Through Baba's and Pati's stories Hariharan examines how modern forms of patriarchy draw on the ancient diktats such as the laws of Manu along with a strategic use of myth. Baba asserts a patriarchal dominance when he speaks in a knowledgeable and direct manner. This contrasts with Pati's more convoluted and less definitive versions of myth. Yet for Devi the implications of gender cannot be fully grasped without lived experience – some of which is learned from Mayamma's subaltern histories.

My readings of Hariharan's use of myth illustrates how it continues to endorse a dominant ideology through stories and allegories of selflessly devoted women but it also creates spaces in which the traditional mythology can be read against the grain, offering the possibilities of a transformative gender politics.

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