

Sept-2023 ISSUE-III, VOLUME-XI

Published Quarterly issue

e-ISSN 2394-8426 International Impact Factor 7.352

Peer Reviewed Journal | Referred Journal



Published On Date 30.09.2023

Issue Online Available At: <http://gurukuljournal.com/>

Organized By

**Continuing Professional Development Events, New Mumbai
Gurukul International Publishing Services, Pune**

Published By

**Gurukul International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
Mo. +919273759904 Email: gimrj12@gmail.com**

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Deconstruction of Patriarchal Stereotypes in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Life*

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Myth has been a favourite theme of the writers of the whole world. They create, recreate, write and/or rewrite myths as the story-telling. 'Story-telling is as old as mankind and in all oral traditions, it is a favourite form' (Gowda V1, 200). They, especially myths, convey a specific message to the people of that particular society in which that myth came in to being. However, most of the myths found in the world are prejudiced against women. They help men to subjugate, dominate, control and oppress the 'second sex'.

All these stereotyped myths and stories come from the ancient great books like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Panchtantra, and the Puranas in India and from the Homeric epics, Esaf's stories and some of the later composed and added parts of the Bible in Europe. They affect the psyche of the people, especially of those who accept them without doubt, and compel them unconsciously to behave accordingly. In Indian myths, the housewife should be happy, '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' (Hariharan 70-71).

The contemporary third-world novelists makes their characters assert their individuality and at the same time they make them meet the social and communal expectations. The portrayal of the social framework and the 'emphasis on plot and character are therefore its strength and not its weakness as Eurocentric criticism makes it out to be in comparing the third-world novel with that of the nineteenth century and regarding it as an unfinished, rawer from of the twentieth century "modern"/post-modern novel. (Kirpal 146-147)

Keywords: Myth, feminism, story-telling, patriarchy, stereotype

The whole plot of the novel, *Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) by Githa Hariharan revolves around the three major female characters Devi, the central character, Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook. They represent three different generation showing different stoicisms in their concerned field of life and career in this patriarchal society. All of them have different stories to tell, as the structure of the novel is in the form of story-within-story. These stories focuses on the character and life of these characters.

Hariharan created new and explored old myths to show the world how women are marginalized, suppressed and oppressed systematically in the Indian societies. Very few could be exceptions to it. A typical myth of virtuous bride bending her head down is everywhere in India. She should be young, intelligent, "fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to 'adjust'". Making-up face to look fair by hiding blackish colour is also common practice. Beauty is considered that which is not black. However, Devi is dark-complexed girl. Therefore, she takes inspiration from Dark-complexed Krishna. Amma also tells Devi that she should wear sari and not jeans. Looking slim

in jeans makes other people think something wrong in Devi (Hariharan: 5, 6, 7, 14 and 17). Up to late 2000 in India, myth of woman's work was to bear children and work at house. Mahesh, Devi's husband, wants wife at home and mother of his children (Hariharan: 23).

The myth of Marriage of Nal, King of Nishadas, and Damayanti is also a stereotype in controlling the behaviour and look of women. It is said that Damayanti was pale, and paleness symbolizes beauty. In short, a woman should not be physically stout or bold in behaviour. The story of the marriage is repeated stereotyped a thousands of time by both the old men and women alike (Hariharan: 19). They also believe and make others believe in the myth of predestined husband. According to this myth, the couples (husband and wife) are formed by the God Brahma in Heaven. Whatsoever one does, but cannot change the destiny. Even if the husband is immoral, cruel, wicked and drunkard, still he is her partner by destiny; and she must bear his tyranny (Hariharan: 16). If a girl deserves a well-mannered and cultured boy as her husband, and if she gets one, she is always referred to with expressions like "What a lucky girl you are!" (Hariharan: 23).

Mahesh turned reverse from what he presented himself before the marriage. He always went on business tours leaving Devi alone at house. They had two or three brief encounters as the married couple. All of her romantic dreams about life after marriage shattered altogether. Moreover, he teased her for being a typical Indian girl (Hariharan 54). Mahesh also expected that Devi should spend nights without having him with her for weeks and sometimes fortnights. He married her out of desire and not because he loved her (54-55).

Men are main source of spreading patriarchal myths in society. Once the father-in-law, Baba, of Devi told her a myth of a woman reaching heaven. Baba told her that a woman should worship and follow orders of her husband without any question in order to reach the imaginary heaven. For his husband is equal to god, i. e. PATI PARMESHWAR (Hariharan 55).

Like Damayanti's marriage, Sita started search of appropriate bridegroom for her daughter, Devi. They meet some boys with different prospectus, finally ending the search with finalization of Mahesh. The marriage of Nal-Damayanti was fruitful, after short separation and misery. However, the marriage in the novel comes fruitless because of the different tests and likes of the couple. Then Devi elopes with the singer, Gopal, in a romantic relationship with him.

One more stereotyped myth is about fulfilling woman's heart's desire. It is commonly believed that every woman should be cunning to fulfil her desire. This belief makes women behave dramatically and unnaturally (Hariharan: 20). It affects her life unconsciously and tries to be cunning to get her desires fulfilled.

Devi finds affinities between her mother, Sita or Amma and the myth of Gandhari, though Devi does not like the myth. In the great epic, the Mahabharata, Gandhari, the queen of Maharaja Dhrutrashtra, the king of Hastinapur, tied her eyes with scarf to make herself blind as her husband, the king, was blind by birth. Gandhari renounced the relishes of aesthetics devoured by eyes. She was believed by the patriarchal society to abandon all the joys which her husband could not enjoy. She believed in serving for her father, brother, son and husband. She lived for these types of men, not for herself or any other female. In the present novel, Sita lives for her husband and the family members. To keep her husband happy, she broke her veena, the stringed

instrument which she used to play as her hobby (Hariharan: 28-30). Her name reminds one of the leading female characters of the Ramayana, Sita. The character of the Ramayana sacrifices her rejoices for her husband, first coming with him to forest and then being sent to forest by her husband. In the present novel, Hariharan makes an ironical comment on the patriarchal supremacy of husband or husband hood saying, 'All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind deaf ones' (Hariharan: 29).

There comes a story of Gauri, the maidservant of Grandmother (Hariharan 31). She got married to a well to do family only after giving the family a handsome dowry which was beyond the capacity of her father. However, her husband was just like an animal. She was beaten up daily by her husband. Yet she could not be separated from her husband and sent to her father's or 'mother's' house due to the rigid patriarchal structure in society. Moreover, she was expected to behave like a girl in the stereotyped patriarchal myth of marriage of a snake with a beautiful girl (Hariharan 33, 34). Signifying that girl should marry with anyone or 'anything' that her father wish to.

The story of Uma, cousin of Devi, suffered a lot before marriage as she was motherless and with the ruthless stepmother and the careless father. After marriage her agonies increased as her husband and father-in-law were drunkards. In one incident, she was roughly kissed by father-in-law, yet it was not taken seriously by her husband. Therefore, she came back to her grandmother to live forever with her. Girls are named after goddesses, but are treated as mistresses, whores or commodities in families. When Devi became distressed after hearing of Uma, her grandmother brought in the myth of Amba and Bhishma (35 to 41) to justify the agony and misery fell on Uma was but natural. She argued that if the Goddesses and divine women had suffered a lot for the sake of their husband or husband, who were we (women) before them? She also said, 'After marriage heart goes to husband...' (37). A woman did not remain a woman, but a part of her husband. So, in a way he becomes a god for her.

Through Grandmother and other older women in the society these myths are circulated to the younger and new-born baby-girls to make them women, as Simon de Beauvoir said in her *The Second Sex*.

A girl who loses her virginity by raped or becoming a widow are considered, by both men and other women, as leftovers, that is tasted by others, so she is not sacred to marry or remarry with. However, nobody asks any such question or speak like this to a man who is involved in a rape or became a widower. He is rather allowed to marry many girls, even if his earlier wives are alive (37). Such liberty is not given to a woman.

A girl is never reared up what Devi once dreamt a romantic and heroic dream. '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 evil, magical demons' heads' (41-45). She dreamt that her would-be husband '... fell to his knees and called me his goddess' (43). Once baba said, 'All men are enjoined to cherish women, and look after them as their most precious wards.... Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods delight; where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless' (65). This and other similar stereotyped statements seem to be in honour of women, but in reality, they claim the strength,

power and supremacy of male gender over the female. It is deeply rooted in the psyche of both men and women alike.

Hariharan also writes about male politics of changing the gender of strong trees. She says, “The peepal is bigger, more masculine in its towering strength, but its forehead and arms are tipped with delicate and tapering, fine-veined leaves. ... Centuries ago, the peepal was associated with the mother goddess; it later changed its sex and became a representation of Vishnu” (58-59).

Up to the last century, a middle aged man used to marry with a young girl of 13 or 14. However, it is expected that she should not live a life of widowhood. She should die before her husband to be called as a sumangaali. What an idiocy! Only the married woman whose husband is alive has given right by the cultural traditions to wear bangles and other ornaments. Hariharan writes, ‘A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him, a sumangali, her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermilion, her arms and neck still ornamented with bangles and gold chains’ (66-67).

Hariharan wrote the about the myth of ‘Kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its Kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a Kritya’ (69-70).

Conclusion

Since the publication of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) by Wollstonecraft, the condition of women began to change gradually. After the rise of radical feminism and then the origin of Deconstructionism, there came a radical change in the condition of women. They started asking questions, like Devi, to the established stereotyped myths, practices, conventions and traditions. Now, if there is no positive change in the condition of women, there is the need of Kritya to save them from becoming victims to the patriarchal society and the typical male oriented mentality of the people living in the age.

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