

FEMALE PROTEST AND ASSERTION OF SELF IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S –*THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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Abstract: *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a Commonwealth Award winning first novel of Githa Hariharan. Hariharan in this novel diligently captures both the submissiveness and the struggle for self identity of her female characters. The novel also portrays the female protest in its myriad forms. The paper makes an attempt to study critically the female protest and their assertion of self in the novel.

Introduction:

The concept of self is a brooding concern for many modern women writers. Githa Hariharan, a post-modern feminist writer, voices the same concern in her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. In the patriarchal system, the identity of woman is that which defines her relation to a male. Either she is a daughter, wife or his child's mother. She does not have her own independent identity. Now, slowly women have begun to move towards self perception and self expression, not entirely against tradition but within family binding. Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a sensitive saga of women struggling to survive in a world of shattered dreams. It is a story of Devi, the protagonist and her desperate search for identity in the traditional Hindu society. Intermingled with Devi's search is the search of Mayamma, the old caretaker and Devi's mother Sita.

Female Protest and Assertion of Self:

The novel begins with Devi's preparation for her departure from America. Refusing an offer of marriage from her American coloured friend Dan, Devi returns to India. Her homecoming sucks her back in the traditional family life. Her mother Sita, skillfully drifts her into an arranged marriage with Mahesh, a manager in a multinational company. After marriage, Devi realizes that she has entered a life she has not really expected. Mahesh is a practical man devoid of any emotions. He views marriage as just another necessity and feels thankful that "Indians are not obsessed with love" (55).

Devi's conversations with Mahesh are very brief. When Devi expresses her desire to learn Sanskrit, Mahesh rudely states, "Don't be foolish,..... And what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge?" (52) When she expresses her desire to take up a job or learn playing cards so that she can be with him, Mahesh's disapproval is expressed only through an inward movement of his lips which "weaves a cunning cord around her vulnerable neck" (56). He never speaks a single affectionate word about Devi. Once when Devi tells him to postpone his trip, he teases her by saying "Why don't I pray to be born a woman in my next birth. Then I won't have to make a living at all"(54). His insensitiveness and inability to understand her shock her and give rise to a feeling of awesome loneliness in her. She becomes aware of the insignificant and secondary status assigned to her by her husband.

But then Devi is not a downright protestor. She wants to give an honest try to bring happiness in her married life. She makes every attempt to fit within the predefined framework of the role of a woman, but Mahesh's matter-of-fact attitude alienates her more. Devi's father-in-law with his inspiring stories about ideal womanhood comforts and consoles her. His stories help her to hold back her loneliness. But her father-in-law's departure and death in America makes her more lonelier. As Mahesh's tour becomes more frequent and longer, the loneliness becomes unbearable for her. She considers marriage a torture to her and it hangs like a knife above her neck :

I am still 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 (54).

She feels entrapped in the marital bond and senses, "Her freedom being thwarted, the gaping emptiness threatening her very existence" (Indira.S-178). Mahesh remains indifferent towards her feelings. Devi now feels a need to protest and assert her individuality. The attitude of rebellion in her drives her to a blissful numbness of Gopal's music, a Hindustani singer, her neighbour. She elopes with Gopal condemning Mahesh to a life without a wife or a child. She walks out of her wedlock courageously:

I will gather together the fragments which pass for my life, however laughably empty and insignificant, and embark on my first real journey. I would like to do better than to sneak out, a common little adulteress (95).

Devi wishes to “Soar high on the crest of Gopal’s wave of ragas” and to seek “a goddess who is not yet made” (95). Devi accompanies Gopal’s troop to many concerts. But as months pass, she feels alienated in his world. When he is performing on the stage, she is in the darkness engulfed audience. They belong to two different worlds, she of darkness, he of limelight. The illegitimacy of their relationship makes matter worse. Devi develops a sense of void. Gopal is too engrossed with himself to recognize her individuality and this compels her to stray away in search of her ‘self’.

Devi realizes that the time has come to leave Gopal otherwise, “she would be forever condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidity of the mainland” (138). Devi decides to return to her mother Sita. This time she is not looking for anchor outside herself. She has gained enough strength to assert herself and to survive on her own. She returns to the faint hesitating sound of the Veena inviting her to the house, “To stay and fight, to make a sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning” (139).

Devi is not the only person in the novel who makes adjustments and sacrifices in her married life. Her mother Sita has also suffered a sacrificial married life. Early in life, Sita shows a talent for playing Veena and her music would pervade the whole house. However one day her father-in-law is furious at not finding things he needs in his puja room and shouts at her, “Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (30). Sita reaches for the strings of her precious veena, pulls them out of their wooden base and answers, “Yes, I am a wife, a daughter-in-law” (30). Thus Sita gives up her music to become “a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised” (30). Her protest in a way is silent.

Sita now moulds herself in super efficient housewife. Planning meticulously the life of her husband Mahadevan, she leads him from promotion to promotion. She never gives anyone any opportunity of complaint. This actually can be seen as her way of protest. She rules with an iron hand as the bitter suppression of her talent and dream leaves her without tenderness. Her attainment of the goal of perfect housekeeper and blameless wife is rather superficial as by doing so she has distanced herself emotionally from her husband and daughter.

After the death of her husband she executes her last job, the marriage of her daughter, very efficiently. She can now see her life almost as an entirety. She dare not look back least she encounter only an emptiness that will reveal to her, “a soiled ground of a life devoted to being an ideal woman” (107).

Having lived all her life according to her own rules, Sita is not prepared for the sudden betrayal of Devi, who elopes with Gopal. Sita resents angrily, “So this was what she reaped after years of sacrifice, years of iron- like self control” (108). Devi has torn her respectability her very name to shreds. Sita is angry but still is sure that Devi would return to her after disillusionment with her lover. It is now time for Sita to introspect and to live her life for her own self. Time to return to her Veena, her talent, her dream which she has denied herself all these years. Sita’s returning to her discarded Veena is a significant step towards inner healing. The novel ends with the picture of a waiting mother and a homecoming daughter.

Another female character who suffers a lot in the patriarchal system is Mayamma, Mahesh’s housekeeper. She is the worst sufferer of all and accepts her fate without any complaint. Married at a tender age of twelve, her innocent childhood is nipped in the bud. Putting away her shells and round pebbles she starts cooking and cleaning for her big household.

Unfortunately, Mayamma fails to bear child and incurs the wrath of her mother-in-law. Mayamma practices penance for being barren. She starves almost every other day, gives up salt and tamarind, worships various gods and goddesses and feeds rice and curd to snakes. Her mother-in-law also tortures her. She feeds Mayamma with yesterday’s rice. When Mayamma is once found admiring her new saree, her mother-in-law “pulled up the sari roughly just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly ground spices into her barrenness” (13).

Even Mayamma’s husband is a lousy one. For him Mayamma is no more than the means to fulfill his carnal desires. Her feelings, emotions, desires are of no importance to him. He calls her “a shameless hussy” (111) and kicks her “after a night of whoring in the rain” (111).

Mayamma, after ten long years of penance, is blessed with a son born on Diwali. After eight years of his birth her husband disappears taking all the money in the house. Mayamma finds her husband's replica in her son who turns into a wastrel early in life. He beats Mayamma with an iron frying pan when she refuses to give him her diamond earrings. Broken emotionally her patience gives way to silent sullen protest. When her son falls ill, she looks after him "but there is not tenderness left in her hand. He dies" (82). As a mark of final protest, "She burns her horoscope with her son" (82). From here onwards her search for some meaning into survival starts. She finds refuge in the house of Parvatiamma, Devi's mother-in-law and works there as a retainer of the house. Though Mayamma could not do much for herself, she nurtures a deep sympathy and affection for those of her kind. She tries to live her life through Parvatiamma and Devi. When Parvatiamma leaves the house in search of god, Mayamma approves of her radical action. When Devi decides to elope with Gopal, she blesses her and wishes her well. She bids Devi to "to seek the river miles away, where the dim forest gives way to a clear transparent flood of light" (126).

CONCLUSION:-

The novel thus projects three main characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma "who walked a tight rope and struggle for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves" (135). Though they may have endured atrocities and become helpless, all the three women do not yield to the sufferings, sorrow and despair. Mayamma and Sita come to terms with their duties and surroundings but the will to struggle help them to survive. Devi lacks the will to choose but later on her character develops and she shows great resolve in walking out on Mahesh and later on walking out on Gopal.

Indira Nityanandan opines that "They prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival. The parameters of choice have altered tremendously and Devi seems a beacon light for the Modern Indian Woman." (198). So all the three major characters of the novel with their will and determination are able to move from subjugation and servitude to protest and assertion of self.

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