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Demythologizing the myths in Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the deconstructive stance taken by the author in subverting the age-old myths that frame the very constitution of our being. We try to analyse how the author through her work targets the authoritative role of the myths which interpellated an individual into a subservient position. It is categorical how the author unveils the ideological backing of such myths which gets popularized through the intervention of mass media like films and tele-serials forming prototypes that gets easily ingrained in the psyche of woman. Any deviation from these ideal formations further lead to a sense of guilt which makes the act of defiance impossible. So the attempt made here by the author is to provide an alternative substitute which seems more realistic and pragmatic and which at the same time debunks the stereotypes thereby forming a real-life image.

Keywords: stereotype, debunks, authoritative, interpellate, subservient, mythology.

Introduction

The word myth as defined by M.H. Abrams is derived from a Greek term "mythos" which signifies story whether fact or fiction that passes on from one generation to another in a particular cultural group as a hereditary legacy. Myths can be identified as a complex cultural reality rather than a simple story. Mostly myths are related to rituals that form set patterns of our day to day procedures but can be differentiated from a legend and a folktale on the basis that the latter's protagonists are either human beings or supernatural beings respectively.

A myth however as expounded by M. H. Abrams is a story in a mythology that may be believed to be true by a set of people belonging to a particular culture. Myths seem to establish certain customs and traditions that have a widespread observance for the rules in accordance with which men conduct their actions.

Githa Hariharan is one of the prominent Indian English writers of the modern era and has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for her best first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. In this novel the focus of the writer has been on the myths that have become the flesh And blood of our Indian psyche.

Myths undoubtedly have become an integral part of our lives which defines our beliefs, traditions, religious practices and our interpersonal relationships.

In the Indian context myths have occupied a place of importance as they not only form an edifice of collective consciousness but at the same time influence the psyche of people as well. The two great epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* that embodies our Indian traditions have been often witnessed to possess authoritative expression. The characters in these myths become examples or stereotypes which are followed without being questioned. Especially gender differences are deeply embedded in these epics and justified as being righteous leaving no place for negotiations or negation as these differences are received with acceptability both by culture and religion.

It is often realized that myths which are the result of certain socio-cultural upheavals need to be re-interpreted and modified with change in the socio-cultural milieu so as to suit the context. On a closer view these myths often seem to be unrealistic and requires a questioning of their universalistic claims. Similarly the epic the *Mahabharata* is replete with discussions and debates but still it becomes a challenge for one to get a categorical answer to a particular problem.

The novel that has been chosen for this study is an attempt made by the author towards a rewriting and revisiting the mythological characters from an altogether different perspective. Githa Hariharan tries to unveil the ideologically inclined myths in an attempt to demythologizing them. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a story about a young lady Devi who has lately returned from the US in order to marry anyone of her mother's choice. Devi's mother Sita who is a widow has summoned her to tie knot with Mahesh who has a decent job and belongs to a respectable family. The notion of an arranged marriage reminds Devi of "swayamvara" as pictured to her by her grandmother where a woman has her freedom to choose her life partner. But unlike a swayamvara Devi is enmeshed in an arranged marriage that does not promise a bright future.

It is after her marriage to Mahesh that Devi realizes how faulty the opinion about a married life as depicted in the myths was. Devi takes refuge in the stories recited to her by her grandmother in her childhood. Her escapism in the world of her grandmother's stories introduces her to new vistas provided by the alternate perspective towards the mythological characters which her grandmother had often overtly tried to impress on her.

Devi's grandmother intentionally had picked on characters from the mythology which were otherwise overlooked. Instead of choosing reputed characters like Sita, Savitri or Draupadi from the various myths her grandmother choose to speak about characters like Gandhari, Amba Damyanti and so on who were less talked about. Many times it has been observed that these prominent characters from myths constitute the image of an ideal woman who is seen as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as strong as Durga, as mesmerizing as Laxmi, as sacrificing as Savitri, which ultimately become role models for women who adhere to these images as a way towards idealism.

Writers like Hariharan have strongly felt that the sub conscious mind of a woman realize that these age old idealistic roles are no more relevant in the changing social and cultural conditions. These roles and images are rooted deeper in the psyche of a woman as she is made to adhere to such roles since her childhood and any rejection of such roles leads to a sense of guilt within her.

In the words of Shashi Deshpande women are inscribed specific roles propagated through myths which are further popularized through the medium of films and tele-serials that play an important role in fostering these ideas and expectations of a self-image. The role models projected by them succumb the women who resort to an act of defiance that overwhelm them with guilt.

Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* have used many mythological stories embedded in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Hariharan has used myths in an attempt to subvert the meta- narratives that had formed a cultural hegemony. As pointed earlier the façade of swayamvara is broken and

revised for Devi as soon as she marries Mahesh. She realizes that in an arrange marriage it is not the bride's choice that matters but on the contrary the decision rests with the boy and his family. Here we are reminded of the mythological characters who unlike the well-known characters like Sita, Draupadi and so on do not succumb to the image making of ideal womanhood but rather follow their hearts desire. Amba a lesser known character in the mythologies portrays to us a fine example of courageous women who transform her destiny from a victim of disaster to a triumphant.

The grandmother narrates the story of Amba who transformed her fate with her own efforts. Prince Bheesma goes to a swayamvara of three beautiful princesses: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Amba, the eldest princess chooses king Salwa and garlands him. But Bheeshma kidnaps all the three princesses and take them to his step-mother. When they come to know that Amba had already married, they let her go to Salwa but king Salwa refuses to accept her and insults her. Insulted Amba returns to Bheeshma, who also refuse to accept her. As a result of this Amba changes her attitude towards life and vows to avenge him. She goes to the forest and undertakes penance, meditate for Lord Shiva. Pleaded with her penance, Lord Shiva gives her a garland and promises her: "who so ever wears this garland will surely kill Bheeshma" (TFN, 39). This story builds a brave attitude in Devi showcasing how Amba became a female avenger who transformed her fate and won over her offender Bhishma.

Through the story of Amba narrated by the grandmother Devi too gathers courage for fighting against her pre-destined idyllic marriage with Mahesh. It is now that Devi realizes the difference that lies between the determination and courage of a character like Amba and meek and docile characters like Savitri and Sita who are idealized by women for their conduct which is considered a necessity as it conforms to socially desired pattern of life. Devi comprehends the deeper meanings of her grandmother's persistent confrontations when she claimed that, "...a woman like Amba a truly courageous woman, finds the means to transform her hatred, the fate that overtakes her, into a triumph." (TFN, 36)

Devi now realizes the difference and the conflict that lies between a woman's desires and the necessity to follow the inscribed roles in mythologies. In the novel Devi chooses Amba and Durga as her ideals in reverting back to the ungratefulness of her fortune and like these characters step up to carve her own destiny. She closes all doors that lead her to idealistic and stereotypical characters like Sita and Savitri thereby subverting the emphasis of the readers to an invariably different framework where relatively minor characters are brought to the forefront.

Here we are reminded of Northrop Frye and his assertion on the creativity and flexibility of myths. In his work "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement", he emphasizes on the possibility of re-interpretation of any mythological work which is possible due to the flexible nature of these myths. Commenting on this he writes:

No rendering of any myth into conceptual language can serve as a full equivalent of its meaning. A myth may be told or retold, it may be modified or elaborated, or different patterns may be discovered in it and its life is always the poetic life of a story, not the homiletic life of some of illustrated truism (165).

Similarly, Hariharan too leaves no stone unturned in experimenting with the flexible character of myths and exerts her continuous efforts in deconstructing the mythic past and subverting the universalistic claims proclaimed by these myths. Devi learns through her grandmother's stories how women like Amba and Damyanti get their hearts desire after great cunning and determination.

Devi recollects her grandmother's story of Damayanti that was taken from *Mahabharata*. The first lesson that paves the way to her empowerment becomes explicit as the story unfolds itself. Nala, the king of Nishad was handsome, brave and virtuous. Damayanti's father decided to hold her swayamvara. Damayanthi was brave and determined to adopt Nala. So she threw the garland around

his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the gods. Devi's grandmother concludes this story with the moral, "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (TFN, 20).

The story of Damyanti teaches Devi to reframe her life outside the framework of stereotype womanhood. She learns to defy all clichés and walks out of an unsuccessful marriage. Though she takes a refuge in Gopal with whom she indulges in an extra marital affair but soon she realizes that she was being a puppet where the strings were held on by the male counter parts in her life. It hardly made any difference whether she was being puppeted by Mahesh or Gopal. The authoritative position was simply being juggled from one male authority to another without much difference to her dreadful oppressive life.

Devi tries to break free from the stereotype image of a woman whose responsibility is to fulfill the roles of a wife, mother and a daughter-in-law. She leaves both Mahesh and Gopal to debunk the notion of the necessity of a male authority in a woman's life. Subsequently her marriage loses all meanings when she fails to fulfill the role of a mother as she is unable to conceive a child. She sees herself as Kali and at times as Durga.

The myth of Parvati the wife of lord Shiva too has been turned upside down in the novel so as to deconstruct the stereotype convention of male desertion of worldly attributes by denouncing the world and acclaiming sainthood by leaving behind their family. The superiority here of the male counterpart in being decisive not only related to their personal life but also about the family members dependent on them has been reversed here by providing an alternative. In the novel Parvati Devi's mother-in-law is a character that has been interwoven with the mythological story of Shiva and Parvati. It has been told in the novel how Devi's father-in-law had married Parvati and rejected other proposals as the names of the other girls sounded modern names, whereas Parvati's name seemed to him an "old reliable name" (TFN, 62). It is ironical in the story that Devi's father-in-law who had always read out philosophical and moral examples of virtuous female characters to her had been sadly deserted by his wife, to initiate her life into sainthood in search of God.

Further the character of Gandhari from the mythology of the *Mahabharata* which have been culturally interpreted as story of sacrifice has been twisted to give another version through the story of Sita, Devi's mother. Devi recalls how her grandmother had often tried to link the story of Gandhari to her mother Sita. Gandhari who was duped in marriage to a blind man had vowed to blindfold her eyes as an act of sacrifice of being a dutiful wife.

Devi's grandmother had always appreciated Sita's sacrifice in giving up her veena and equated it to Gandhari's sacrifice. On one occasion soon after her wedding Sita was like any other ordinary day playing on her veena when unable to pay heed to her father-in-law's calls who gets infuriated and says: "put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter in law" (TFN, 30). Since that day Sita never played the veena and became a dutiful housewife and then broke the strings of the veena saying: "yes I am a wife, a daughter-in-law" (TFN, 30).

Unlike her grandmother Devi realizes that nor Gandhari neither her mother Sita had willingly sacrificed their assets to embody praise from others. On the contrary their sacrifice was a way to showcase their anger at being fooled in marriage to a blind man that become her motive of years of blind suffering and similarly in her mother's case the vow to never touch the veena again showed her anger and protest against her father-in-law's accusations.

Though socially Sita reflects the image of the mythological Gandhari that helps her in achieving her goal of wifedom, she unknowingly creates a gap between herself and her husband and daughter. She distances herself from her husband to such an extent that he dies alone as if he does not want to share even his last struggle with her. She mechanically performs all the cremation ceremonies symbolizing her transformation from a mere woman to a person of heroic propositions. Sita's wifely

role gives her a sense of power, where she rules her household territory with an authoritative hand and works day and night for the wellbeing of her husband like a “conductor than an accompanist” (TFN, 103).

Hariharan subverts the notion of attainment of idealistic womanhood as desired by women. Through the character of Sita the author portrays the ideals perpetuated through myths which creates more cracks in the bridge between mythical stories and real-life situations. Sita’s retraction to her real self at the culmination of the novel and her act of dusting the broken veena symbolizes her refusal to go through anymore ordeals to attain perfection. Her refusal to be trapped anymore in the idealistic roles and her acceptance of Devi back in her life make her emerge as a stronger woman.

Thus, it emerges that in the novel Hariharan has brought the ancient myths face to face with reality. She wishes to attain a balance between the past and the present by incorporating changes in the older edifice by reshaping it. The revisionist attitude towards the ancient myths unveils its authoritative perspective and questions these meta-narratives for the values embodied in them which still remain deeply embedded in us and seems glorious to us.

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