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GENDER ISSUES IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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Gender equality refers to the *equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men* and girls and boys. Gender equality will be achieved only when women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Over the past few decades both developed and developing countries have made several steps in reducing the gender gap in all aspects of life.

Indian women writers depict the feelings of woman in an effective manner. Their novels consist of the latest burning issues related with woman as well as those issues that exist in the society since long. They describe the whole world of woman with stunning frankness. They write about the unexplored female psyche from childhood to complete womanhood. Majority of the novels depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated housewife. Indian women writers have gone a long way to portray woman's miseries; many of them like Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai have been largely successful in portraying the social issues of women through their works. In this context, Githa Hariharan is one of the prolific Indian women writers.

Githa Hariharan was born in Coimbatore in 1954. She grew up in Bombay and Manila. Her debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers prize for the best first novel. Some of her famous works are *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). Her novels have been translated into number of languages including French, Italian, Spanish, German and Greek. Her published works include novels, short stories, essays, newspaper articles and columns.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* gives a true picture of gender and identity crisis faced by Indian women. It mirrors the patriarchal dominance in the society and explores the changing faces of woman in the modern era. The characters in the novel truly represent various cross sections of Indian society. Despite their experiences of hardships, Devi, Sita, protagonist Devi's mother, and Mayamma show a positive attitude towards life and find some kind of happiness in their life. The three women belong to different generations and are different in terms of education and social circumstances. Devi, Sita and Mayamma expose the different dimensions of oppression faced by women, and bring alive the underworld of Indian women's life and ethnicity. The novel presents the inner lives of woman and tries to analyse the confined social structure which does not accept women's role apart from the traditional role.

With Socio-feministic perspective, this paper analyses *The Thousand Faces of Night* and presents a variety of female characters with varied wishes, frustrations, desires, and search for identity. The paper delineates the long travel of the female characters from subjugation to independence from the patriarchal power structure.

Devi's grandmother's stories which were drawn from the Ramayana and Mahabharata focused on the woman's pride, destiny and self - sacrifice. Her stories seek to establish a link with lived experiences. She narrates the story of 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" (Hariharan 28). On

meeting her husband for first time, she was taken aback for "The white eyes the pupils glazed and useless." (Hariharan29). In anger Gandhari vowed to never see world; so she bound her eyes with the help of her veil. Gandhari's story is reflected in the life of Sita, Devi's mother. As Gandhari blindfolds her eyes after finding her husband Dhritrashtra blind, Sita also breaks the string of her veena and also burns all her photographs to avoid obsolete memories. Devi's mother Sita has to put aside the music, the need of her soul to perform traditional duties of wife, daughter-in-law and mother. By stifling her own wishes she transforms herself into an ideal daughter-in-law. She broke her veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice was never the sacrifice of weak. She considers Devi as the symbol of veena. For years thereafter, she remains unhappy; this is confirmed by her extreme silence and the rigidity with which she conducts herself in her real life. Towards the end of the novel, she acknowledges her selfhood and the needs of her 'self'. Her return to music and the welcome Devi gets are strong indications of her release of her 'self' from the clutches of the past. She also exhibits courage and determination to take hold of her own life after her widowhood. In a subtle way, Sita shows the power of asserting her individuality by breaking the myth of male superiority. She learns to keep her freedom and individuality alive within the relationship. It is towards the end of the novel she is shown to be a woman with a will of her own resuming her love for veena.

Mayamma's life has many shades that a woman can ever imagine to experience in her life. She tells that she got married when she was still a child. Her husband was a man of bestial instincts, and her mother-in-law was a peevish woman who kept on shouting on her. Mayamma presents miserable life of a woman who was married early. While in the early years of her marriage the reason of her suffering was her inexperience, in the later years her sterility became the cause of her plight. In order to mend her fate she was asked to do penance. For ten years, she did a long and tedious atonement to get a child. Finally she gave birth to a debauch child who too tormented her. Her husband ran away and took away with him all the money in the house. Moreover, her mother-in-law died "whimpering about the curse Mayamma had brought upon her household" (81). Mayamma belongs to the generation of women who quietly bore to death their liabilities and never rebelled even if they wanted to, because it was considered outrageous for a woman to shirk away her familial bindings even if she was crushed underneath it. Her plight reflects one more facet of brutal social reality of India; child marriage and the tortures that women bear if they fail to produce a male child for the family.

Devi's father-in-law, Baba is a typical illustration of a male-dominated patriarchal world. His character is revealed through the stories which he elaborates to Devi. They are elucidation of the codes laid down by *Manu* which explicit the virtuous and chaste women who inspires their husbands along the path of Dharma by their sacrificial nature and subservience. Baba's stories are different from Grandmother's stories. While grandmother's stories "were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into the subterranean possibilities. He defines the limits." (51) Baba's stories were not ambiguous and its centre-point "an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife." (51). Baba's stories always reflect that women should be devoted to their husbands. He explains the means of reaching Heaven by serving their husband with devotion and care. Baba sets the criteria for a good housewife and,

"The housewife should always be joyous, 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." (Hariharan70).

Muthuswamy Dikshitar's story, Purandara Dasa, Syaama Sastri, Thygaraja's second wife story are Baba's illustrative stories.

Like Baba, Mahesh too believes that a woman gets respect only if she is devoted to her husband and family. He is chauvinist and hardly bothers about his wife's emotional needs. He is totally inadequate as a husband. He simply cannot and does not wish to understand Devi's deepest longings, fears, and needs. Devi tells:

"He snarls instead about women's neuroses and my faulty upbringing. Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An animal fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali around my neck?" (Hariharan74).

His typical chauvinist nature becomes more apparent when he proposes her to have a baby. He makes this proposal in order to pacify and make her busy. For the purpose, Devi gets ready to meet the doctor, to officially discuss her personal life. She describes her state as: "The long afternoon stretches before me like an endless, pointless road. My ache with restlessness, my tongue is parched with lack of use. The old man is garrulous enough if I seek him out, droning half-stories about a part that oppresses me like a life I want to forget" (Hariharan79).

Sometimes marriage brings an unfortunate predicament which all women must suffer. An America returned Devi suffers the same humiliation that Mayamma an illiterate, ignorant village woman suffer a few decades ago. The only change is that modern women are humiliated through modern technology "smear", "injection" and "fertility centre". Since the protagonist is unable to conceive a baby, she loses her hold on the family too. After making a comparison between her past and present, it becomes difficult for her to stay at ease with unfulfilled past and unsatisfying present. She becomes restless to embrace some change in her life. Nothing around her seems capable to soothe her. She feels cheated like Gandhari and slighted like Amba. Her penance takes multiple forms of response from self pity to revenge and from self-inflection to a strong sense of injustice.

At this juncture, she meets her neighbour Gopal, a singer and falls in love with him. Unlike Mahesh, this man is very caring for her and by his acts makes her feel that she is very special for him. She feels overwhelmed by her new experience of life. She goes for live-in relation with Gopal, becomes part of his staff, and accompanies him in his musical tours. For some days, her new experience gives her pleasure. But after sometime she realizes that both belong to two different worlds. She feels uneasy about her relationship with him. Devi represents another harsh social reality of contemporary society – a married woman's plight who is not happy with her husband and decides to live with her lover. But, since it is unacceptable in a traditional society, she becomes an open subject to everybody's comment and leering. Ultimately she decides to change her life and to have her own story – a different story which has been told till now neither by grandmother nor by Baba. She gets fascinated by her mother-in-law Parvatiamma's story who was more ambitious. Like Parvatiamma, she decides to turn things upside down by doing what she has not been told and planned by others to do. Instead, she takes up to write a new story. Being fed up of others expectations and all pervasive male hypocrisy, she decides to leave Gopal's house. She returns to her mother "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all" (Hariharan139).

Thus, it is apparent that the novel deals with almost every aspect of women's life and their plight, a sordid social reality of contemporary Indian society. It shows that an all pervasive chauvinism has been controlling Indian social life from time immemorial. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is the narrative that constantly challenges expectations about what it is to be a good wife, mother, and woman. The myth and reality of Indian social life are finely echoed by Gita Hariharan. She critically examines and questions the age-old norms of the Indian culture and customs. Her women protagonists are the representatives of the present day intellectual women. Her protagonists are brave and have the potential to face the risks alone. They all are very clear in their motive of attaining freedom from the masculine gender. Even though Devi, the protagonist undergoes many hardships and loneliness in the beginning of the novel, in the end she is a new woman with grace and strength, knowledge and talent, kindness and sympathy, perfect to live in the new world of her.

Work Cited

Hariharan, Gita. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New Delhi: Penguin Book, 2008. Print.