

*Research Paper—English*



Feb, 2010

## A Study of The Evolution of Three Generations of Women in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*



**\*Mrs. Bindu Jacob**

**\*Research Scholar, Asst. Prof. Dept. of English Maharaja Agrasen International College, Raipur.**

*The Thousand Faces of Night* can be aptly defined as the several faces of thought presented by Githa Hariharan about the central theme - the struggle and predicaments of women in Indian society. The central theme is categorized as the quest for identity, penance, female bonding, marriage, chaos and dilemma by the rebellious protagonist Devi. Devi has failed to establish her identity in the framework of a male dominated Indian society as a wife in an arranged marriage, or as a rebellious lover. She ultimately comes back to her mother, Sita, "to stay and fight and to make sense of it all, she (Devi) would have to start from the very beginning" (139).

Mayamma is the old caretaker of Mahesh's (Devi's husband) house. She was married into a large family at the early age of twelve; the village astrologer made the forecast that she was very lucky and would be welcomed in any house with a son like a young god. On the contrary her husband was a useless gambler who never understood the meaning of the vows he had made before the ceremonial fire. She knew no happiness in her marital life. When she could not conceive a child, her cruel mother-in-law forced her to do penance which not only involved refrain from food and eating left-overs but also heart rending offerings like bathing the lingam by the blood from her breasts to change her destiny. "Mayamma welcomed her penance like an old friend" (80). After ten years of pleading with the goddesses,

she gave birth to a male child. Eight years later her husband disappeared taking with him all the money in the house. Though she never saw him again, she saw his replica in her short-lived son - a wastrel from the birth. "The day he died Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handiwork; now all these had been snatched from her" (82). She burnt her horoscope with all the signs of luck on it along with her son's corpse as a sign of her protest against the severe penance of 'silent enduring' she had performed throughout her life. She puts an end to all the suffering she has endured, "she has coveted birth, endured life, nursed death" (136).

Mayamma belonged 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. Mayamma had no bitterness in her, she could live several such lives again, but she was aware that the new generation is not as patient and may not prevail circumstances similar to hers, she says "Devi, that child so easily moved to tears, what does she know of penance?" (113). Devi's grandmother also belonged to the same generation as Mayamma. But her stories were full of women of valour who avenged their offenders with an iron hand. The heroines of her

stories were embodiment of gallantry like Gandhari – a woman who “embraced her destiny – a blind husband – with a self sacrifice worthy of her blood” (29). The girl who married a snake embraced her fate because she was given away in marriage by her father unknowingly. Amba the beautiful princess who cast aside her finery and spent her youth in the dense forest piling penance on penance to avenge Bheeshma who had scorned her and bereaved her of her marital life. All these stories ended with an advice, which suggested that a woman should fight alone for her identity in this male dominated world: “a woman meets her fate alone”(28); “a woman fights her battles alone” (36). Devi’s grandmother also provided refuge to many tormented women who have been orphaned, deserted by philandering husbands, impoverished, widowed seeking refuge, help and advice from her. “On the threshold of senility for years- she collected in her old age more and more wounded refugees in her house, stray objects of charity” (39)

Sita (Devi’s mother) – the protagonist of the second generation, bridges the gap in the evolution of women from the generation of Mayamma to that of Devi. Sita is a cool, self-confident, poised, middle-aged mother. She is a woman who always knew what she wanted and got it; this achievement of Sita can be felt in everything around her – her home, her garden, her husband’s fame and her daughter’s education and wedding. This confident and graceful executioner, was once a young bride who entered her husband’s house with the mottoes of good housekeeping, good taste, hard work and her divine talent - her music. But her dutiful life in her in-laws house could not spare her years and hours of practice and penance from being sacrificed on the altar of expectations from a dutiful daughter-in-law. She therefore tore it apart from herself with a relentless self-discipline and “embraced her destiny” (29) and snapped “in a discordant twang of protest” (30) the strings of her beloved veena, which she could play in a “rapturous flight” (30). When she “cut herself off from the clandestine line” (103) she set more

matured goals for herself like “Economy and Ambition” (102). She took her husband, Mahadevan - a daydreamer, “by the hand and led him from promotion to promotion till he was within the exclusive circle of fast rising executives” (104). “Ruling with an iron hand, she thought for all three of them” (105). She hated illusion however tantalizing it was, so “she had seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of its soul” (105), “her gods rode the most practical, the most tangible of chargers” (105). Sita had just begun to relax when she received the telegram regarding Devi’s elopement with Gopal. She is greatly disappointed and furious about Devi’s act of imprudence. She wonders whether this was the result she reaped after “years of iron like self-control, after all those quarrels .... won through silent, ferocious struggles, and sleepless nights of thorough, between-the-lines planning” (108).

Sita knew that Devi’s elopement was the “inevitability of cause and effect, the interplay between situation and options” (108). She knew Devi’s reaction was familiar to the bold decision made by her in her youth; when she tore the strings off the wooden base, and let the blood dry on her fingers to remind her of her chosen path. . When her resentment cools down she decides to brood back as to where was the mistake made. She examined the “relics from her past” (109) to discover that her vital relationship itself with her daughter was strained in her blind chase to win the title of approval. She had treated Devi as her “new veena to play on” (104) She therefore prepares herself for a novel and fresh start, a life that she had missed in her race for approval. She sits before her broken veena freshly dusted, and waits for Devi to return.

Parvatamma of the second generation is also a link that bridges the gap of generations. She was a loving, gentle and feminine lady whose generosity led her outward, away from herself. She remained an enigma; subjected to the loneliness of the big house after her children had been sent away to the boarding school. Her husband, a Sanskrit Professor believed “a man

needs a wife to help him with the business of living” (61) His faith in his filial piety was to such an extent that he felt that it was not necessary for him to see his bride, who was selected by his father. His views and stories always revolved around women who have already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. His stories were never about ambiguity, fantasy or magic; they always had a theme – an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife. His concept of spiritualism and detachment from the worldly illusions cast a negative spell on his wife. Parvatiamma’s privation found a new diversion and it drew her firmly into devotion. The urge to implement the messages conveyed in the bhajans and kritis sung by her, grew stronger within her day by day. Parvatiamma was an ambitious woman; she had like a “man in a self-absorbed search for God” (64), stripped herself of the life allotted to her as a householder and left her house in search of salvation.

Devi, the protagonist is a representative of the third generation of women. She leaves America with a heavy heart on account of her parting with Dan, her black boyfriend. Even after sharing an intimate relation with Dan, she never considered him as her true lover or life partner. Devi here portrays the multiple effects of the strict and perfect upbringing of her mother Sita, and the rich mythological “diet” (27) of valiant women provided by her grandmother. She grew up certain that a world of splendour awaited her. As an only child of her parents, Devi’s childhood was an easy one with a doting but spineless father, “the motherly hand, firm and all knowing” (104). Her grandmother’s house was crowded with “superhuman warriors, men and women destined to lead lives of golden splendour” (27).

Devi’s marital life with Mahesh lacks the colours and excitement that she had expected. Mahesh is unromantic; he views marriage “as a necessity, a milestone like any other” (49). Devi is bound to remain inside the cage-like house with nothing to do all day. Her frustration paramount to such an extent that she is amazed at her

audacity, she wonders whether it was “trust, foolishness, or a reckless courage that made me agree to this intimacy?” (49) She tries to mould herself to her present life, but despite her earnest efforts she fails to walk that “clear, well-lit path” (55) which will lead her to heaven. She remains a prey to total boredom that assails her. Her desire to take up a job is met with a discouraging tone of Mahesh. Devi broods: “Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors everyday? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck?” (74). Devi’s condition here can be correlated to that of the protagonist Nora, of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll House*.

The stories, which Devi had grown up with, had developed within her a mechanism of self-defense against any onslaught from the other side. Mahesh had everything a lady could hope for, but his cold and indifferent attitude was more than she could suffer. She feels cheated like Gandhari and slighted like Amba. Her penance takes multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-infliction to a strong sense of injustice. Childlessness, she feels was the price she had to pay as a penance for her marriage with Mahesh. In such a situation of loneliness and deprivation, Gopal, the neighbour who is a classical singer, seems a place of comfort for her. His melodious music strikes an intimate chord in her. She hopes to “soar high on the crest of Gopal’s wave of ragas” (95).

True to her fears Devi finds out that Gopal’s music “was no longer a distant call, romantic because unknown” (127), her life with Gopal begins to seem like that of a “kite that had been snapped free of its string” (129). Gopal was wedded to his music and concerts, as Mahesh was to his job. He was an artist “scaling dizzy heights with arrogance” (89) She comes to the determination that the time was right and if she did not act now, she would forever be condemned to drift between worlds. She leaves behind the sleeping Gopal and boards a train back to Madras

“to stay and fight, to make sense of it all” (139). Although Devi leaves like a fugitive in the middle of the night, she is now “no longer on the run” (139) she is ready to make a fresh beginning and live her life carefree. She is welcomed by her mother with the melodious sound of the repaired veena. Her mother knew that she would come back to her so she never bothered about looking for her after she left Mahesh.

I would like to conclude with the view that Mayamma is the archetypal woman, who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived life exactly as she was expected to. Sita chooses her feminine role of a good daughter-in-law and wife therefore she trampled her music and destroyed the artist in her. Although she does not react to her daughter’s actions in a positive manner, she realizes that it was a fate similar to her own, suffered once. In her case a more tradition bound society and family prevented her from asserting her individuality and hence her penance was mute, often manifested in self-inflicted suffering. However it is Devi who represents the modern feminist. Her modest ambition of making good in her life is thwarted

firstly by the insensitive attitude of Mahesh and later by the indifference of Gopal; the two dimensions of oppressive male ego

*The Thousand Faces of Night* creates a new paradigm for the recreation of a woman’s identity. Hariharan’s idea behind making and naming the protagonist ‘Devi’ is to reinforce in a woman the realization about her inherent powers. The mythological meaning of the word ‘Devi’ is ‘mother goddess’ on whom all the gods and goddesses are dependent for their powers. Devi’s grandmother interweaves the tales of ordinary women, Sita, Uma, Gauri and Devi – with mythological heroines, to form a familiar pattern of heroism and suffering. These stories work as a bridge between the past and the present. Hence, Devi not only symbolizes fury, sublimity and power but also independence. Therefore, survival is of paramount importance for every woman. The three main characters of the novel manage to survive by walking a tight rope. They do not succumb to despair or sorrow, instead they prove their strength of womanhood in their struggle for survival.

---

## REFERENCE

---

\* Hariharan, Githa. “The Thousand Faces of Night” India: Penguin, 1992. \* Kothari, Reena. “Female Bonding: Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night”. Indo- English Fiction: The Last Decade. Eds. Indira Nityanandam and Reena Kothari. New Delhi: Creative, 2002. 41- 46.