

Marital Home as a Home of Sacrifices in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992)

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Abstract

The foundation of a perfect marital home is laid upon the sacrifices made by women. Sacrifice holds relevance in the life of a woman. For woman, sacrifice is the most valued prize that she has to pay to show her selfless duty and devotion towards the family and home. The most common sacrifice shared by every Indian women while crossing the threshold of her marital home is to forget her previous upbringing which she has received in her parental home and to re-orient herself according to the norms set by her in-laws family in her marital home. Therefore, a marital home represents "a system of values that prizes sacrifice above all" (171). The drudgery of household tasks and family care is given priority over everything else. A woman is required to give up her interests, education and individuality and to "...disappear in the household simply doing the household work" (Lal 81). Githa Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) accentuates how the marital home becomes a 'sacrificial knife' for woman. It focuses on the restricted and segregated lives of Indian women in their marital homes. How the notion of marital home undergoes a change for two generations of women is shown through the women characters of *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Devi's struggle to liberate herself from the confined space of her marital home and find a place of her own beyond the female boundaries is the main focus of the paper along with insights into the marital lives of other women characters.

Keywords: Home, Struggle, Sacrifice, Identity, Self-discovery.

The foundation of a perfect marital home is laid upon the sacrifices made by women. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines sacrifice as "the fact of giving up something important or valuable to you in order to get or do something that seems more important" (1348). Sacrifice holds relevance in the life of a woman. For woman, sacrifice is the most valued prize that she has to pay to show her selfless duty and devotion towards the family and home: "Sacrifice is a remedy for having been born of woman" (Keenan 171). The most common sacrifice shared by every Indian women while crossing the threshold of her marital home is to forget her previous upbringing which she has received in her parental home and to re-orient herself according to the norms set by her in-laws family in her marital home. Therefore, a marital home represents "a system of values that prizes sacrifice above all" (171). However, her

sacrifices lack recognition and neither give her respect nor elevate her position in the home. Instead she is treated as a domestic servant: "...a selfless giver, someone who gives and gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however unreasonable and harmful to herself" (Kishwar 46).

The drudgery of household tasks and family care is given priority over everything else. A woman is required to give up her interests, education and individuality and to "...disappear in the household simply doing the household work" (Lal 81). In this context, Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011) also highlights that the primary job of woman is to maintain her home. She is recognized in the society through her devotion to the family and home: "By administrating her home, she achieves her social justification; her job is also to oversee the food, clothing and care of the familial society in general" (484). Githa Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) accentuates how the marital home becomes a 'sacrificial knife' for woman. It focuses on the restricted and segregated lives of Indian women in their marital homes. How the notion of marital home undergoes a change for two generations of women is shown through the women characters of *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The story of the novel revolves around Devi who goes to America on a scholarship to pursue her Master's degree. After the completion of her degree, she is forced by her mother to return to Madras, her hometown. The turning point in her life begins when she migrates to Jacaranda House, her marital home in Bangalore after her arranged marriage to Mahesh. This paper highlights the journey of Devi from the outer world of western education, liberal lifestyle and radical ideas to the confined enclosures of her marital home. She undergoes difficulties while making adjustments according to the norms of her marital home. However, the claustrophobic and segregated atmosphere of her new home chokes her and urges her to search for a "home", a place she can call her own, where she has the liberty to make her own decisions, do things in her own way, a place where her self blooms: "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned" (Angelou). Devi's struggle to liberate herself from the confined space of her marital home and find a place of her own beyond the female boundaries is the main focus of the paper along with insights into the marital lives of other women characters.

A traditional concept of marital home for second generation women is depicted through the character of Sita, Devi's mother. She is portrayed as a woman who sacrifices her entire life by devoting her time in exercising control over her marital home. In her parental home, Sita was trained in music. She used to play *veena*. Her parents "had trained her with the best teacher they could find" (TFN 30). After her marriage to Mahadevan at the age of twenty, she entered her marital home with a "grim resolve to be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law" (136). Like a traditional Indian woman, she also gave priority to the household duties and after completing the housework, devoted her leisure time to music: "She had been trained as a daughter-in-law too, of course, and she played the *veena* everyday after she had finished her household duties" (30). She tried to strike a balance between maintenance of her marital home and perfection of her talent.

Indian women are trained that "Sacrifice is the human torch of Indian values" (Mehta). A woman has to pass through many ordeals in order to get the title/recognition of a good daughter-in-law. Sacrifice is also required from woman in terms of food habits. She is required to eat

whatever is given to her without complaining. Clara Nubile in *The Danger of Gender* (2003) also highlights that “In many Indian homes, men eat first and women have to make with the leftovers” (25). Sita loved to eat rice in her parental home, but she learnt to satisfy herself with the dry *chapatis*: “Marriage had meant that Sita would have to learn to eat dry chapatis, which refused to go down the throat...” (TFN 103).

An Indian woman sacrifices everything for preserving her marital home. She offers not just love, affection and ungrudging service but also devotes all her life at the altar of duty towards her family and home. The sense of sacrifice is also present in the character of Sita. Her self-surrender and self-sacrifice is highlighted in the incident when her father-in-law “couldn’t find a thing he needed. The flowers had not been picked, the floor had not been swept” (30). He called Sita but she could not hear the call of her father-in-law, as she was playing the *veena*. Presuming her to be careless he enters her room, “Sita is not allowed any privacy in her husband’s home, as is demonstrated by the manner in which her father-in-law barges into her room. She is rarely alone, except in the kitchen or in the small store room attached to it” (Remedios 54), shouting: “Put that *veena* away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (TFN 30) Sita instead of confronting, in a moment of dejection, pulled the strings of *veena* out of the wooden base and vowed not to play *veena* again. Her decision not to touch *veena* again reflects her self-sacrificing attitude towards the family and the home: “In India, for women, acceptance or the sense of selflessness is more important. That finally makes the woman comfortable and satisfying. They want the happiness of their family members at the cost of their sacrifices” (Dadaji 82).

Thus, a woman’s role in the home is recognized by the household activities she performs. She is expected to give more time to the household chores and sacrifice her interests and hobbies. Sita’s father-in-law’s charge highlights that by failing to perform one single task for him, her role as a wife and a daughter-in-law comes under scrutiny: “To him Sita’s identity and subjecthood are constituted solely by the housework she does, and not by her musical ability” (Remedios 52). Thoroughly ‘exorcised’ by the words of her father-in-law, Sita donned the role of “*householders*, those who keep, create, and nourish household activity” (Chawla 27). She became methodical about housekeeping: cooking, dusting and organizing her house. By sacrificing her own skill, her love for playing *veena*, she made her marital home a blissful one but at the cost of her own sacrifices, her talent: “[she] sacrifices her passion and puts her domestic duties on priority. Sita became what others expected her to be, even at the cost of her own passion and individuality” (Mishra 423).

Studying in America, Devi was influenced by western culture which gives freedom and opportunity to women beyond domesticity. Western culture offers more preference to individualism and freedom of choice as something valuable. Children in that culture have the freedom to make their own decisions and the parents respect their children’s decisions: “For them the guiding principle of parenting is to allow freedom of choice to the children” (Sireesha 74). In the North-American university campus, Devi was involved with Dan, a black American. She is attracted by “the purple-hued, velvety black of his skin; the dazzling white smile of his sensual teeth; the soft voice” (TFN 3). With Dan, she enjoyed the relative freedom denied to her

in the disciplined and restricted atmosphere of her Madras home: “She was no longer the weak, dog paddling Devi, a raw, half-baked creature” (8). However, she refused Dan’s proposal due to “her inability to conceive of a life with him” (6). She knows he will neither be accepted by her community nor by her mother because of the cultural differences between them. American notion of individualism is different from the traditional Indian culture. The Indian family values the principle of collectivism, emphasizing that children should listen and follow the dictates of their parents: “Generally, in India, parents in collaboration with other elderly relations and friends start planning their children’s marriage well ahead of time. Parents decide who, where and when they should marry” (Sireesha 83). She knows her relationship with Dan will bring disgrace to the reputation of her family: “the dream was shattered every time she met Dan...neither family had come to the picture—his was not important enough as far as he was concerned. Hers was far too important, far too precious, to be subjected to the humiliation...” (TFN 3).

Devi, like every Indian women has a limited choice regarding marriage partner: “the Hindu system regarded mate selection by self-choice as undesirable and feared that freedom of choice might upset the process of adjustment of the bride in the new family” (Bhakat 179). Whether woman is educated or illiterate, the decision of her marriage lies in the hands of her parents. Same happens in case of Devi. Though in love, she is weak to challenge the set cultural norms and “lacks the will to choose... she quits the U.S and leaves behind Dan because of a sense of filial piety, marries Mahesh as a good daughter should, attempts to be a full time wife and house maker as an Indian Pativrata should” (Nityanandam 191). Therefore, Devi sacrifices her love in order to save her mother from disgrace and humiliation and returns to Madras to live with her mother.

Marital home is a place of “an actual confinement for women, being barred from public realm and from power and influence” (Dengel- Janic 36). The lack of proper understanding between husband and wife often turns a perfect marital home into a prison. Devi marries Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company. Her migration to her marital home in Bangalore becomes the turning point of her life. She faces problems of adjustment in the new and strange environment of her marital home: “It took me at least a week to find my way around the house without wandering into some room or the other...” (TFN 48). She finds her marital home different from her parental home which was perfectly maintained by her mother. She finds her marital home lacking perfection and full of disorder: “The house reeks of character. Nothing here is symmetrical or alike; no concession is made to the merely pretty” (48). Everything is out of place. The upstairs rooms are large and airy, but the rooms downstairs are “like deep, dark, cool caves” (48). The house has two kitchens— one modern and ventilated. But the kitchen that is used is “like a cave, the dark shadows suggestive of furtive mice and cockroaches” (50). In this context, Simone de Beauvoir remarks, “...the women spend half their days kneading, cooking, reheating and kneading again... Done every day, this work becomes monotonous and mechanical...” (493). Therefore, kitchen highlights the routine work that is done every day and in dark depressing environment it ultimately results in dullness for woman.

Husband and wife play a pivotal role in the happiness and survival of marital home. Mutual understanding between husband and wife is the major foundation of ideal marital home. Lack of love, understanding, and consideration between the couple acts like a termite eating into the walls of the marital home. Devi enters her marital home with the “standards and expectations that spiritually and emotionally confine Indian women, with very little room for adjustment” (Sireesha 35). Devi expects emotional support and understanding from Mahesh. However, Mahesh is a different man who does not believe in sharing emotions and feelings with his wife: “All that spewing out of feelings is self-indulgent, he says. It is un-Indian” (TFN 49). The frequent business trips of Mahesh do not allow them to spend time together. The lack of love and companionship between Mahesh and Devi highlights the imbalance in the marital home.

Marital home turns out to be a place that stifles her freedom and encloses her creativity. Thomas Foster defines home as “a crucial test of the power of male-dominated discourses to objectify women, to assign identity and circumscribe women’s social existence” (242). Indian society vests the power of decision making with the husband: “Husbands generally...remain the authority figures and decision makers...” (Sireesha 34). He is the one who decides about her dress, makeup, food, friends besides, which activities his wife should take up or how she should conduct herself in social circle. Woman lacks decision-making power within the family. In her marital home, a woman has to seek permission from her husband for every single decision of her life. Devi has a limited choice in her marital home. She has to seek permission from Mahesh for everything: “Marriage does not invite woman to transcend herself with him, it confines her in immanence. She has no choice...” (Beauvoir 481). When Devi expresses her desire to learn Sanskrit, Mahesh does not allow her on the pretext that it is irrelevant and useless: “what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge” (TFN 52). She also requests Mahesh to teach her the game of rummy. But he ignores her plea: “‘Don’t be silly, all the others are men’, he said” (78-79). He does not teach her to play cards because according to him, rummy is a game played by men. Moreover, Mahesh rejects her decision to take a job. Like Baba, he too believes that a woman who is devoted to her husband and family and stays within the home is a respectable woman.

Woman is never appreciated for the work she performs at home: “family labour is poorly done, poorly paid, and regarded as menial and disgraceful” (Beecher 13). The work done by woman is not considered as work/labour. The unpaid housework by woman makes her economically dependent on her husband: “The wife’s work within the home does not grant her autonomy... it makes her dependent on her husband and children...” (Beauvoir 497). This dependency is shown in the comments made by Mahesh. When Devi requests Mahesh to postpone his tour, he hurts her by considering her work as insignificant and effortless: “‘Why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth,’ he teased. ‘Then I won’t have to make a living at all’” (TFN 54).

Home symbolizes affection, love and warmth among the family members. Despite the presence of Mahesh and Baba, Devi’s father-in-law, the home becomes lonely for Devi because there is no communication among them: “The stillness of the old house chokes me... I am alone. I listen to the rain and the gulmohur all day... my tongue is parched with lack of use” (78-79).

Unhappy in her marital home, Devi searches for her own happiness in an extra-marital affair, bringing an end to her uncomfortable life with Mahesh. She finds a brief solace, and the illusion of individual fulfillment, in her love affair with Gopal. Devi finds liberation in adultery, the only escape from her lifeless confinement. Devi finds a companionship in Gopal that she misses in Mahesh, “We talk... he misses nothing. He knows every muscle on my face, he sees the shadow before it falls across my eyes” (78). The feeling of being cared and loved which she wanted from her husband Mahesh in her marital home she gets outside the marital home from her lover Gopal.

Githa Hariharan through the character of Mayamma, the caretaker in Mahesh’s house highlights how marital home becomes a site of marital rape for her. Marital home is always associated with the safety and security of woman provided by man. But marital home proves to be a dangerous site for Mayamma: “For some women safety, security, comfort and refuge can be found beyond the reaches of home or “outside” home” (Chawla 154). Every night she had to bear silently her husband’s sexual assault: “He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow... If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with the other” (118). In this context, Simone De Beauvoir also highlights: “there are certainly more rapes committed in marriage than outside of marriage” (472). Though bedroom is seen as a female space, it is another space where woman experience the male dominance. A woman is expected to fulfill her husband’s sexual urge as it is her duty and obligation as wife. Male authority is predominant even in the bedroom where a man forces himself over his wife irrespective of her consent.

Home is not always a comforting haven for woman whether illiterate or educated. Her marital home “led her in the opposite direction—from a socially active childhood and youth to a virtual self-imprisonment within her home” (Dobson 232). During the day, Mayamma remained overburdened by the household chores and the physical abuse exercised against her by her mother-in-law. Her marital home pushed her to give up her innocent childhood: “I put away the shells, the smooth, round pebbles I had played with in my parent’s home. I took into my hands the iron skillet and blew the fire into the stove even before my mother-in-law woke up” (TFN 116) to perform the household work: “I drew water from the well. I scooped handfuls of fresh, wet cow dung and patted the nauseous mess into identical round cakes. With the best of the dung, I swept the floors clean” (116) without any love and concern from those for whom she worked day and night.

A different concept of marital home is presented through the character of Parvati, Devi’s mother-in-law, Parvati who “stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder” (TFN 64). She makes a different choice. She moves away from a restrained marital home to live a life of her own choice. Through her story, Githa Hariharan attempts to show that instead of living in a torturous relationship a woman can lead her life without a man by her side. Parvati’s marriage moves her into a loveless and lonely marital home. After her children go to the boarding schools, the vast emptiness in the marital home results in Parvati’s “imprisonment in the home and in the marriage plot” (Michie 58). The loneliness of the house chokes her. She tries to escape from loneliness by spending time in the puja room: “As for the wife, reason is not her lot, she is without ‘reflection’; so ‘she goes from the immediacy of love to the immediacy of the

religious” (Beauvoir 468). She decides to choose a path of self-discovery in search of God: “for an older generation of women, often the only legitimate way out of imprisoning gender roles...was to follow in the itinerant footsteps of Mira Bai, the Bhakti poet who renounced the world for her god” (Kishwar 3-8). The character of Parvati highlights the journey of woman in search for self-discovery. Parvati leaves the home after giving Mayamma the keys of the house, “You know how to look after him, and keep him comfortable” (TFN 63). Nobody from the family makes any attempt to contact Parvati or call her back. Her action is considered as treacherous according to Mahesh. Baba declares “For a woman who leaves her home in search of a god, only death is a home-coming” (64).

Githa Hariharan through the character of Devi, Sita, Mayamma and Parvati highlights how the concept of marital home changes for these women. Inspired by her mother-in-law, Devi also steps out of her marital home of sacrifices expecting a space of her own with Gopal. Towards the end, she realizes her role of the ‘other’ in the lives of three different men: “I am no one... I have no husband or lover, only this blissful anonymity in the darkness” (TFN 128). She finds a great urge to find her own space and takes refuge in her mother’s home.

Devi’s crossing the threshold of the marital home also brings a change in Sita: “She... dismissed the cook and chauffeur. She began driving and cooking for herself...Ready for self-examination, she sat before the relic from her past, the broken veena, freshly dusted, and waited for Devi to come back to her” (TFN 109). She retrieves her lost self by returning to her veena: “Her return to music...are strong indications of her release of her “self” from the clutches of the past” (Singh 22).

The marital home of Mayamma does not provide her solace and comfort instead her move to Parvati’s home provides her refuge. The space she expects to have in her marital home she finds in Parvati’s home. Mayamma becomes a permanent member of Devi’s marital home. Every member of the house leaves the house by entrusting her the responsibility of the house. Baba trusts her, Mahesh wants her to maintain the house even in his absence and Devi finds refuge in her by sharing her feelings with her.

To conclude, marital home is generally defined as “a locus of love, embodying the sense of free spirit, emotion and empathy where life becomes secure and warm” (Jain 177). The women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* do not find such security and warmth in their marital homes. These women characters feel trapped in their marital homes. They have few choices: “In the contemporary world, there are only two clear cut slots women can fit in – one leads to sanyaas in a spirit of resignation and fatalism; the other a full-time housewife. Mayamma and Parvatamma chose the first; Sita opted for the second – “blameless wife”. But Devi finds herself “in between, around, on the edges of all circles” (Khan 138). Each one of these women except Sita find solace outside the marital home thus changing the traditional notion of marital home as a space of their entry with no exit. In case of Sita, she gives up her self for the survival of marital home, becoming over possessive about the family and home. It is after the return of her daughter Devi she realizes that she as an individual has an identity and needs to articulate. This comes out toward the end of the novel when she is playing *veena* which she had given up many years ago

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