

**Understanding Mythological Hegemony: an Analysis of Githa Hariharan's
*The Thousand Faces of Night***

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Abstract

Myths play a very significant role in the lives of people in India. This Paper aims to analyse that how mythology keeps a strong hold in shaping the mindsets of people in Indian context. Like how a particular belief system, behavioural patterns, superstitions, ceremonial codes are formed under the influence of mythological stances and are accepted by the masses without questioning. This paper also showcases that how the older generation which is well-versed in mythology transmits this knowledge to the younger generation by narrating stories significant to each occasion, thus, making them indelible via internalization. Besides these, this paper mainly delves into how mythological hegemony constructs socio-cultural norms, behavioural patterns, gendered roles, men-women relationship during the last half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Mythology, hegemony, socio-cultural norms, behavioural patterns, gender roles.

Githa Hariharan (born. 1954) debuted as a novelist with the publication of *The Thousand Faces of Night* which won Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her in 1993. The novelist projects Devi as the central character while presenting her journey from United States of America to Madras, India. In the beginning of the novel, she returns from USA after completing her education nurturing a dream of visiting America again for her prosperous future. She returns India as an open minded and highly ambitious girl, but her mother, Sita starts searching suitable

matches for her despite her unwillingness, but as per her mother's wish Devi gets married to Mahesh. She feels alienated in her married life due to the busy schedule of her husband who is manager in a multinational company. Now, her father-in law's stories become her only companion like those of her grandmother's used to be during her childhood. Her flights of individualistic self expression get restricted with the weapons like tradition or myths.

A Glossary of Literary Terms defines mythology as a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain the intensions and actions of the deities and other supernatural beings that why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide reasons or justification for social customs, observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths relate to social rituals like set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies. In classical Greek myth is known as "mythos" which stands for any story or plot whether true or invented (Abrahms and Harpham 230). Whereas Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes mythology as the "ideas that many people think are true but that do not exist or are false: the popular mythology that life begins at forty" (1012). In other words, myth is an ancient story about gods and goddesses and their mysterious activities. There may be human character in myths but the main characters must be supernatural beings. Myths are collectively called mythology. The Greek mythology, the Roman mythology, the Egyptian mythology and the Indian mythologies are well known in the world (Cuddon 526).

The term "Hegemony" was popularized by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1934) contrasts rule which is direct political control, which uses force whenever it is necessary whereas hegemony functions through the circulation of ideology not as a visible force rather more subtle, invisible, and unconscious suggestion. For this, Ideology requires a commonly accepted cultural form. Ideology can circulate in popular culture, folk songs, legends and local myths and become an integral part of the lives of people (Bary 158). While deliberating on hegemony, Pramod K. Nayyar views hegemony as the domination of particular sections of society by the powerful classes not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but buy

winning their consent to be governed and dominated. Like ideology, it works through consent than coercion (Nayar 130). Therefore, hegemony is achieved through the circulation of ideology. Ideology is a very key term for Louis Althusser who defines “Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society” Through his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” Althusser says that in order to bring desirable changes in the society or state uses either repressive structures or force i.e. police force, army, prison, law courts etc. or ideological structures like schools, churches, family, art, media literature and so on. If the former uses power or force the later wins the consent of the masses, hence becomes hegemony (Bary 157-58). Raymond Williams defines hegemony as “the whole lives social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind which can be abstracted as ‘world view’ or ‘class outlook’” (Williams 101). Mechanics of ideology that serve hegemonic purposes, work through six different strategies according to Terry Eagleton: i) By promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; ii) Naturalizing these beliefs to render them self-evident; iii) Universalizing these beliefs; iv) Devaluing ideas that might challenge it; v) Rejecting alternative or rival forms of thought; vi) obscuring social reality (Nayar 132). On the basis of the theories propounded by the above theorists, hegemony refers to the process-including ideology-through which the dominant classes maintain power through the consent of the people. Hegemony works most effectively when the dominated accept their domination.

The novelist showcases that how a mother stands for a tradition and plays her hegemonic role through the character of Sita, Devi’s Mother. Devi returns enthusiastically after completing her education as an ambitious girl from America to her home in Madras with her dreams of a prosperous future who wishes to make her career and wish to prove her individuality, but her mother stands in between her and her dreams as her father in no more by this time. Despite granting Devi the freedom to choose her path by chasing her ambitious dreams or giving her freedom to become financially independent first, Sita gets swayed by the traditional role of a mother to find a match for her daughter. Soon after Devi’s return from America, the relatives

start visiting their home. Devi does not wish to meet with anyone else, on her mother's insistence she starts meeting with them although unwillingly. Initial few days pass by without warm communication between the mother and daughter. About a month later while cooking in the kitchen, Devi's mother hints about match making for her wedding. Sita systematizes her plan for bringing the desirable changes in the personality of her daughter. She first invites her relatives to her home for the sake of socializing her daughter and hoping desirable proposals for Devi. She pays special attention to Devi's costumes whether they are presentable or not. She says one morning. "Devi, will you wear the silk sari I gave you yesterday? You look so thin in jeans, people will think there is something wrong with you" (14). When Devi wonders for the people, her mother says that the relatives wish to see her. Devi says:

Everyone was cousins, uncles, aunts, her brother-in-law, his sisters-in-law, my grandmother's cousin, deaf and frail. They arrived in batches, some for lunch, the less favoured for a quick and steaming-hot coffee. Amma entertained then all, a picture of dignity and charm, fielding their questions with experts counter-attacks. I, it seemed, was expected to do little. My very presence, the new silk sari, my unforgotten tamil, the gold chain around my neck, were enough. I sat with them, listened to their news bulletins of births, miscarriages, illnesses, deaths, and answered their probing questions with evasive monosyllables.

The second round was always easier. They no longer asked me questions; I had only to listen. With her mother's wisdom, Amma probed to them that she had not made a mistake in sending a young, unmarried girl to America. 'Your daughter will be lost to you, Sita'- they had shaken their heads and followed up their prediction with illustrative stories of boys and girls who never came back, married Americans and, and forgot their ageing parents in India. (14)

But Sita used to defend her nurturing by saying that Devi might seem different but she is as obedient and docile as their home-grown daughters are. Thereafter, Sita's relatives bring marriage proposals for Devi. Due to her mother's insistence, Devi meets five bridegrooms in

three months, but she accepts to settle her life down with Mahesh who is a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpastes. In this way one sees a girl who is highly ambitious and who is a champion of individuality accepting her mother's design of wedding without questioning with the passage of time.

Through the character of Devi's grandmother, the author succeeds in propagating the hegemonic cultural traditions and rituals via myths and passes them over to the next generations. The stories Devi had heard from her grandmother during her childhood become indelible in her memory. The grandmother used to answer Devi's each question with a new and relevant story. Such stories keep on flashing in her mind throughout the novel on crucial junctures. Her grandmother used to narrate a new story on each new event and each story aims at imparting a new moral lesson. When for the first time, Devi is pushed by her mother to have a meeting with srinivasans, who had come there to consider her for marriage for their son, she reminds the story of Damyanti that how the beautiful princess got married. Her grandmother tells her that on the morning of *swayamvara* [self-choice of a groom] the Sun was brighter than usual. "All the kings were dressed in robes and jewels of such brilliance, the eyes didn't know where to look. And the gods-oh, dazzling! They didn't sweat, even in their heavy robes of brocaded silk, and their feet did not quite touch the ground" (18-19). The kings and the gods who were there to claim Damayanti just floated up to the hall. To describe the ritual, the grandmother adds:

Earlier Damayanti had been anointed by her maids with fragrant oils and a paste of rice powder, turmeric and sandalwood. Slim wasted jars encrusted with precious stones were lifted over her head. The fresh spring water flowed over her and then her fair body was dried with silk. Her hair braided with pearls and emeralds, her eyes darkened with kohl, a vermilion circle growing in the centre of her forehead, she floated like a fresh lotus down the carpet of the hall. (19)

Following the tradition of *swayamvara*, while considering every king and god lined in the hall, Damayanti puts the garland around the neck of Nala, and comes up with her husband. Such a narrative prepares Devi for the institution of marriage although unconsciously if not for a grand

or a royal one. The grandmother teaches Devi the meaning of a real woman through the story of Gandhari who was to rule a palace that was twice bigger than parents' palace. After reaching her bridegroom-prince's chamber dressed in bridal finery, she becomes impatient to know that why her bridegroom has not come to welcome her. As she walks with quick steps towards her husband who was standing beside the window looking up at the sky but as he turns around, she sees the white eyes, and comes to know about his blindness. Devi's grandmother says, "In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing. But she tore off a piece of her thick red skirt and tied it tightly over her own eyes. She groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury" (29). The grandmother says that Gandhari was a wilful, self-sacrificing and a proud woman. Another story, the grandmother narrates is of Amba, imparting a message that how a woman turns revengeful after being humiliated in the hands of the powerful, especially after having lost her love (39). Whereas, the story of Ganga and Shantanu expresses the piousness of motherhood (89). The grandmother's stories generally revolve around the idea of womanhood. All the narratives transmit a particular cultural heritage and the upcoming generations imbibe the morals from them although unconsciously.

Thereafter, through the character of Baba, Mahesh's father who is a retired Sanskrit Professor, the novelist propounds the wisdom of Holy Scriptures acquainting the readers with the righteous conduct and value observance as per their gender in family and society. Baba remains the only companion after her marriage to Mahesh till Baba's departure to New York. His stories make a point that the saints lived their lives according to the time-tested traditions and the central point was an exacting touchstone for a woman or wife. While deliberating on the role of women in family, Baba says, "The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens. On the death of her husband, the chaste wife, established in continence, reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practiced self control" (55). The above quote might seem expressing patriarchal mindset clearly but Baba also speaks about the role of man while quoting Manu, he says, "Fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in laws should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods delight;

where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless” (65). Further, women play a crucial role in a saint’s initiation into *bhakti* [worship or devotion] giving an instance from Jayadeva’s life. While writing *Gita Govinda*, Jayadeva had written sweet words into Krishna’s sweet mouth, “Oh Radha, the poison of love has rushed up to my head. Only your tender, rose-coloured feet on my head will chase the poison down my body” (65). After coming out of his inspired trance, Jayadeva noticed the sacrilegious thought and after crossing out the lines hands the manuscript over to Padmavati, his wife. He finds the lines correctly restored in the manuscript as he sees after having bath. Then Padmavati tells him that he himself had taken the manuscript and made changes, but he knows that he did not come back in between rather Lord Krishna in his guise and Jaydeva falls on her feet for god grace. And “Jayadeva keeps those lines in the song of *Gita Govinda* and signs as the husband of Padmavati” (65). Therefore, it is a virtuous wife who ignites the lamp of dharma [right path and justice] inside her husband and vice versa.

The acceptance of a snake as her husband by a beautiful daughter who had been consented by her father to be given in marriage for the son of a man, who was in search of a bride for his son (33), remaining no desire for golden jewellery in Dikshitar’s second wife after seeing the deity Ambika loaded in glittering jewellery in a dream (52), and references to goddesses like Sati, Parvati, Gauri, Durga, and Kali (94-95) showcase the virtues, sacrifices, hardships, penance, piety, and a sense of commitment the women possess. Thus, the women in Indian context are expected to inculcate these virtues in their character and while doing so they generally do not feel rebellious.

One of the most significant aspects, the novelist seeks to voice is the depiction of stereotyping of gender roles prevalent in the society at large. Besides the mythological hegemony, hegemony of relations performs a crucial role in internalizing it. In fact, it is a relative of an individual who brings an endless chain of hegemonies in its defence. In this context the first and the foremost influence in changing and setting Devi’s perceptions is her grandmother who through numerous stories prepares her that how to become a good girl and a virtuous woman and what are the roles of a woman. After returning from America, her mother

Sita leaves no stone unturned in order to train her in gender roles. Devi's father-in-law preaches about necessity of the mutual harmonious relationships of a husband and wife, and indeed, he too specifies the unsaid responsibilities of both the genders. Mahesh shoulders the responsibility of managing the meal on Devi for the party he has arranged at home for his colleagues where except old maid, Maya there is no one to assist her. He neither hires cooks nor assists Devi for the preparation of the meal. He believes if he does work in the company, it is his wife's responsibility to manage home which is a typical example of gender biasness. Devi says while managing her father-in-laws death rituals, "Now I am really a woman: a mother in my receding past, a husband before me. I must follow his self-contained footprints, with clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves" (84). Even Baba's bride was finalised by his mother as he says to Devi, "We would never have thought of questioning our parents' wisdom. I saw my wife for the first time on our wedding day. We were blessed with a special kind of trust you don't find anymore" (62)

The above analysis shows that myths play a very significant role in constructing the collective consciousness in Indian society. Most of the rituals and practices result from the myths. Myths are so deeply incorporated in the lives of people that they cannot be separated or thrown out from life. For example Devi is considered as the goddess of the home and her grandmother believes that wherever she goes, she will bring good fortune (36), Devi's mother was named after the goddess Sita, and Parvati, Mahesh's mother was named after the goddess Parvati, and Baba also prefers the name of Parvati for his would be spouse, when he is given the choice to choose a name among 'Hema, Parvati, and Mohana' (61) even without seeing anyone of them. The observance of these myths gives the believers inner strength and peace of mind. Moreover, once the myths establish a strong hold over the older generations, and the younger generations are made to believe in them due to their relations without questioning. Thus it becomes a systematic process of ritual formation, ethics and desirable behavioural patterns in Indian culture. However, it mars individualism. Therefore, non-observance in a theistic culture might lead an individual either to clash with the observance or it leads to alienation.

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