

Interaction between Myth and Feminism in Githa Hariharan's Select Works

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Abstract

Many Indian English writers have tried to bring about a close intersection between feminism and myth. Githa Hariharan also features among such writers who try to voice the feminist sensibility in her novels from a post-colonial feminist perspective. The women in her novels are mostly divided between the restrictions imposed by the traditions and their will to follow their individual choices. Hariharan, through her writing, also tries to relate their conditions with the mythic characters that have suffered injustice in a patriarchal society. Besides being an impactful writer Hariharan is constantly engaged in social activism aimed at bringing about a change in the condition of females in India. She blatantly writes about women's issues in a very evocative language. The paper aims to highlight the feminist cadences in her select novels. It also discusses the way in which she has deployed the mythic mode to present certain nuanced realities which women face in contemporary times.

Keywords: Myth, Feminism, Conflict, Alienation, Marginalisation.

Githa Hariharan is a contemporary Indian writer writing in English. She was awarded the prestigious Commonwealth prize for her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). Her works present a unique blend of myths and feminism. Myths remain constant themes in her works as often appropriates myths from popular culture in order to show their contemporary relevance in society. Her novels highlight the marginalization of women in a society which continues to be patriarchal in its functioning. By foregrounding her works against the backdrop of myths, she highlights the modes of structural violence against women. Her approach to feminism is surely not defined by the outright rejection of patriarchal values, however, the characters in her novels are in the process of attaining the female consciousness of being trapped in a society where men continue to overpower women. They persistently try to rebel against the system, which imprisons their existence and chokes their voice.

Hariharan's appropriation of myths clearly reveals their influence on the collective consciousness of people in a society. William Doty highlights the nature and the process in which the internalization of myths takes place. In his essay "Mythophiles Dyscrasia: A Comprehensive Definition of Myth", he notes:

“Frequently myth tends to become so thoroughly internalised and intrasubjective that its inventiveness is no longer recognised but it is considered as the way things are literally. Then mythical concepts are considered not as expressing tensile relations between concept and reality, not as metaphoric approximations to complex mysteries, but as simple absolutes which in turn shape ideologies and theological belief systems.” (540).

The ideological power exercised by the myths can be easily decrypted in Hariharan’s novels. *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) is Hariharan’s first novel. The story revolves around the character of Devi who is both the protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel. Devi, who has lived abroad before her marriage, finds herself a misfit in the traditional role of an Indian woman. Being educated outside India, Devi stands as a prototypical modern woman who does not believe in the strict adherence to traditional beliefs. And therefore, she fails to comply with the commitments and responsibilities towards her in-laws and her husband Mahesh. Besides Devi, the two other characters who feature in the novel are Devi’s mother Sita and her caretaker Mayamma. While Sita and Mayamma adhere to the image of an ideal woman in Hindu society, at the same time Devi finds it difficult to follow their footsteps. These three characters represent the three generations of women who undergo alienation in some point their lives. As P. Padmini observes:

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality. (126)

Devi is pushed into the system by the bond of marriage which confines her existence within the walls of the home. She says “This fortress that shuts out the rest of the world... holds me fast to its thick, sticky walls” (*TFN* 13). Hariharan shows the power of Indian myths from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the other Indian mythological stories, which play a crucial part in forcing women to stick to the rules prescribed for attaining ideal womanhood. Hariharan correlates all three female characters in the novel with the well-known mythological characters from Indian mythology, such as Amba, Ganga, and Gandhari who symbolize femininity. The femininity, these characters display, leashes women by confining them to a particular role. Luce Irigaray calls such femininity a “masquerade” in which “the woman loses her self, and she loses her self playing on femininity” (84). Despite living centuries apart from these mythological women, they still serve as an example for wives mother’s daughters, daughter’s-in-law for contemporary women, who are coerced to identify with the self-sacrificing and submissive roles.

Devi who is not ready to give up her freedom for her marriage agreed to marry a man of her mother’s choice only to make her mother happy. Such marital arrangement reminds Devi of the story of Damayanthi’s *swayamwara* from mythology, as related to her by her grandmother. It is through her grandmother that she is introduced to a host of other mythological women like Gandhari, who plays a decisive role in Mahabharata. Devi says that her grandmother’s house was “Crowded with superhuman warriors, men and women destined to lead heroic lives” (*TFN* 27).

Through these mythic stories, the women in Devi's life try to imbibe the values which support patriarchy. The old conservative values are also reflected in her father-in-law's (Baba) statements, which clearly support gender discrimination in society. He says, "The housewife should always be joys 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" (TFN 71). Therefore, Baba too is depicted as a person who is a victim of the social construction of gender, which sanctions men to control women in the name of traditional values of ideal womanhood.

Hariharan's next novel *The Ghosts of the Vasu Master* (1994) is apparently a novel about the broader issues of education, learning, and the search for identity. The novel is the story of a retired schoolteacher and his journey towards his self-realization. The key character in the novel is Vasu Master who uses different stories from myths and legends, to heal an abnormal boy, Mani. The novel also deals with various feminist issues including the marginalization, violence, and alienation of women. In her interview with Arnab Chakladar, Hariharan calls the novel as her "most ambitious project", wherein her attempt has been to look at gender "elliptically" and that she considers the novel as "the most autobiographical" of her novels (2005). The ghosts in the title of the novel refer to the women in the life of the protagonist – his mother Lakshmi, wife Mangala, Jameel, Rita and Eliamma.

Though the novel does not explicitly follow the features of a feminist novel, it portrays the female characters of the novel as a victim of the traditional society. While focusing on the feminist elements in the myth, H.B.Patil notes:

The present novel (*The Ghosts of Vasu Master*) is essentially about stereotypes as found in the literature and culture of India. The focus of the novel is on the exploration of the stereotype of traditional Indian woman...In it Vasu Master's mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional woman. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women. (1)

Lakshmi is a victim of alienation as she was ignored from her early childhood and since then she has not been able to get over the isolation she faced as a child. Her condition remains the same even after her marriage. We know of her plight from Vasu Master's focalisation, who tries to empathize with her mother at a later stage in his life. He says, "It is very surprising then that Lakshmi had melted away into the shadows of this lord, tyrannical household. She lived just about too long enough to my father his heir, and obviously, that was a shoddy job" (32). Hariharan tries to reach out to the inner recesses of a woman who is conscious of her status and longs to be free from these restrictions. Being a product of a misogynistic society, the Vasu Master also treats women as inferior beings. Mangala, his wife remains alien to him throughout the story as he never tries to reach out to her on an emotional and a human level. Vasu Master relates:

Although Mangala and I had two sons Vishnu and Venu, I knew her more a cloudy memory than a person. I found myself speculating about her real self, a woman who had remained as obscure as my forgotten mother. At this distance

the Mangala that I recalled was pale and insubstantial; a figure perennially on the retreat. I always saw her in my mind against a vast seashore in the background, the monotonous slosh and the thud of waves against the rock and sand drowning out all possibility of words. (40)

Besides Mangala, Eliamma, the fisherwoman is also portrayed as facing the same issues. She is not only marginalized only on the basis of her gender but her caste and community are also a reason for her inferiority complex. Hariharan relates:

Eliamma walked alone by the sea night after night. She looked out into the watery horizon with longing. She yearned to go far beyond the distance she could swim. She wanted to be in the centre of the expanse she saw, in a womb held in place by the ocean's ancient secrets. (127)

Through these characters in the novel, Hariharan tries to highlight the pathetic condition of women in society and the different ways in which they try to handle the issues of their marginal existence.

Hariharan's fourth novel *When Dreams Travel* was published in 1999. This novel, like her previous novels, also takes up the case of females and their connection with myth. The novel is a compelling story based on the revision of the greatest legend of all times, *The Arabian Nights*. The heroine of the revised story is Duniyazad who is Shahrzad's sister in the source text. In this novel, Hariharan again challenges the age-old norms which attempt to establish an unjust patriarchal order. She questions the male superiority by hinting at the male chivalry code which victimizes women. "...it is always a man who waits for them...otherwise where are the terror and excitement and the hard-won martyrdom?" (53). Hariharan recurrently highlights the tyranny of the Sultan which presumably led to the death of Shahrazad, after the end of *The Arabian Nights*. While Shahrazad is rendered powerless by Sultan in the source text, Hariharan has endowed her with the power to dream. When Sultan enquires her about the source of her stories she replies, "I don't have a sword, so it seems I can not rule, I can not travel, I don't care to weep. But I can dream" (29). Shahrazad admits that it is the power of dreams which enables her to survive in the source text.

Through her creative endeavour, Hariharan merges the elements from the legend and presents it as a reality. The narrative in *When Dreams Travel* clearly depicts Hariharan's profound knowledge of mythology and how to employ it to meet the feminist ends. Duniyazad does not yield to Sultan's power and remains consistent to her cause. Such strength in character is also a key feature of all the female actors in Hariharan's novels. Savita Patil notes,

Hariharan's women characters have strength of their own, and inspired of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. Most of her novels present a typical, middle-class housewife's life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself to create space for oneself...She believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. For her portrayal of middle-class Indian women, their inner conflict and quest for identity, issues pertaining to marriage and sex, and their disillusionment. (74 – 75)

Hariharan's novels successfully unfold the condition of women and their struggle to sort the conflicts within and outside their being. She uses her craft to create a faceoff between the modern women with the mythic representation of women in society.

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