

Feminine anxieties between myth and reality in Githa Hariharan's
The Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

The tale of a female or to say the confessional sketching of a female's mind has always been taken up from male's point of view. Until 1980, such practice of seeing female from a visionary range of a male's critical psychology was a prevalent norm. Mary Wollstonecraft can be seen as a precursor of the feminist movement with her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). The gist of her work was that the education of women can create opportunities to contribute to society. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), has discussed the unequal given to women. Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), discusses the subjugation of women as a second sex. She takes the example of the portrayal of female characters in the novels by D. H. Lawrence. Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) propounded the terms 'feminist' as a political position, 'female' a biological position and 'feminist' a cultural position of women. But in the 1980's, the female phase in Elaine Showalter's terminology that the female writing got revolutionized since now female author was writing about female subject. There was a shift of the feminist thought from criticism of patriarchal world to a search for female outlook. It was a time of re-visioning, rewriting and retelling of myths from a feminist point of view. The neglected women writers were able to create their own space. A new literary canon exclusively for feminist concerns was structured. The very idea of feminist accounts came out as a method of looking at feminist ideology from the fresh eyes of an empathizing female.

Introduction

The Thousand Faces Of Night presents the accounts of three females of three different generations. The first generation is represented by Devi's grandmother and Mayamma. The second generation is that of Devi's mother Sita and the third generation is that of Devi. All the three generational women although separated by time have a common level of unrest against the social and cultural doctrines of their male counterparts. These women struggle unendingly for getting their liberal space breaking the cocoon created by patriarchal world. Hariharan through her characters presents the verisimilitude of females plight irrespective of age, time and generation. The women characters in the novel tend to pacify themselves with their similar accounts to justify the fact that they are not alone in this juncture of humiliation of the second sex.

There is a like-mindedness which helps to vent out the emotions at different stages of the novel. Sita and Devi had relationship like any other mother and daughter, but peeping more, it is full of contrasting emotions. Sita has a strong desire out of her heart that her daughter should not be deprived of basic freedom and good education. In this regard she sends her to USA for her education. Contrastingly, the pseudo voice of mother with the inherently embedded voice of father compels her to snatch her daughters freedom. Devi was called back by her mother to get into a matrimonial compromise with a practically unknown entity, thus paving the way for another Sita in making, this time in a different age. This can be termed as a retrogressive shift from happiness to doom of another signifier lost in the aporia full of disentangled signifiers on a hunt for signified.

The Thousand Faces Of Night presents ironically the gratification of wishes of women. Sita sacrificed her cherished talent of playing veena in want of becoming a dutiful daughter-in-law. She hopes as a mother that her daughter should dream but realistically she asks her daughter that "She should stop dreaming now" (45). This assertion of Sita is on account of pain and fear. The aspect of pain is an outcome of her experience as a dutiful daughter-in-law. The fear in her mind is of seeing her daughter facing the similar hardships imposed by the patriarchal world.

The suppression of a women can either be a subdued person as predominantly a prevalent situation, or she can turn out to become a fugitive. Sita and Mayamma are the example of the subdued class, while Devi represents the radical fugitive class of women. Devi leaves her double faced husband Mahesh to be in the company of her lover Gopal. But, She couldn't justify herself whether her lover was compassionate and her husband was not, or whether they both were the same belonging to the chauvinist class of men. Her situation stands on a similar as narrated by account by her grandmother. The grandmother's story of Amba, the princess, who was kidnapped by Bheeshma , the son of goddess, on their swayambara. Bheeshma lets her free, on learning about the king of Salwa , who was first chosen by her at the swayambra. But king of Salwa does not want her as wife as she was Bheeshma's wife according to him. This makes Amba realize "a woman without a husband has no home" (38). This plight of Amba stands similar to Devi who being shattered by the egocentric husband gets doubly shattered at the hands of a lover turning out to be a flirt. Amba's account "... a woman fights her battle alone."(36) is reaffirmed by betrayed Devi to say, " to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning." (139).

Gandhari's story narrated by the grandmother presents the undeterred revolt of woman against her blind husband. This tale from Mahabharata is viewed as a mythological equivalent of Sita's plight. As Devi's grandmother has lamented that " a woman meets her fate alone" (28), Gandhari who was anguished after getting married to blind man ,ties her eyes to challenge the situation. She was another willful lady who "... embraced her destiny" (28). Gandhari's penance and Sita's sacrifice compliment each other at the level of mythology and real life respectively. Sita like Gandhari conditioned herself to survive in the patriarchal world. The testimony of his survival instinct is known when she inharmoniously tears off the strings of her harmonious veena. Like Gandhari Sita's tearing off the strings of veena can be called as the self governed protest against the atrocious world of men.

Mayamma , the housekeeper in Mahesh's house is another voice to the feminist accounts in the novel . She belonged to an old generation and like Devi she was not able to use an alternative other than penance and slavery of her husband. For ten years of her marriage she was cursed for remaining barren. At last she gave birth to a male child who proved to be the exact replica of his father's patriarchal self. Mayamma's sufferings were endless. Her maternal affection was torn apart when she was beaten by her twelve year old son with an iron pan. Only after the death of her husband and her son she could come at peace with her own self. She with her past experiences full of dismay and disappointment started believing in her suffering and the suffering of women as an acceptable norm. Her fate as a sufferer is typically on the lines of Manu's doctrine in *Manusmriti* , translated in English by Sir William Jones in the year 1794. Manu on the basis of the patriarchal lineage documented the laws for women in *Manusmriti*. With the passage of time many ideologies have evolved according to the need of the time, but the male ideology of commodifying women remains the same as it was in the past. Sir William Jones quotes from *Manusmriti* ,

“A barren wife may be superseded in the 8th year; she whose children die may be superseded in the 10th year and she who bears only daughters may be superseded in the 11th year; but she who is quarrelsome may be superseded without delay.
(1794:9/80)

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* the double faced persona of males is shown through the eyes of the male. The institution of marriage has no respect for Mahesh, “it is a gamble he says. You measure odds as best you can , and adapt yourself to the consequences.”(49). He persuades his wife Devi to drop the idea of job and opt for the painting classes of his friend's wife Tara, just to limit his wife to the domestic chores and get into the mainstream like her male counterparts. It was Mahesh's desire of attaining fatherhood , which paves the way for Devi's visit to the gynecologist . He didn't bother to get the opinion of his wife, whether she was ready to bear a child or not. As per documented facts in *Manusmriti* translated by Sir William Jones:

“Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently.”(1794:5/151)

Even following the stories narrated by Baba, Devi’s father in law regarding the essential virtues for an ideal women, he expresses, “ non-violence, truthfulness ,honesty, purity ,control of senses-this is the dharma of all the four castes”(66). But nowhere the virtues most essentially for the males have ever been referred, which suggests that a male in his embodiment of a sexually superior than female, must be accepted without any folly. Manu considering men to be a suggestively faultless creation of God has opined:

“ Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands.”
(1794: 5/157)

The laws of Baba with the backdrop of Manu’s doctrine reflect how a women must behave within the limits imposed by men. Baba’s stories speak about the fixities and constancy, thus showing close ended and conclusive nature the male discourse. On the other hand the stories narrated by the grandmother are full of fancies and imagination, question, metaphors and indeterminate. Such kind of narration is typically associated with females who are open ended in their discourse with a saturation of anxieties on a hunt for getting vented out.

To conclude, it can be stated that *The Thousand Faces of Night* problematize the issues of women. It gives voice to eves of different age and generation but with the same ubiquitous suffering. With their instinct of becoming submissive inherited by them ironically as a legacy women try to break the shield of socially imposed taboos. The females like Mayamma could not find an alternative and hence surrender to their fate. But Devi with her characterization has sparked a possibility of searching for an

alternative. So, the novel mirrors rigidity of men and the resistance of women to break open the shield.

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