

IMPOSING OF WOMANHOOD ON INDIAN WOMEN IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S NOVEL 'THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT'

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the forces that impose womanhood on Indian women in the Githa Hariharan's novel 'The Thousand Faces of Night'. Among those forces, patriarchy, ideology and tradition are the most ones. Githa Hariharan believes that, not only women but the lives of every member of a family get affected in one way or the other at the hands of patriarchy. The patriarchal ideology forces parents to repress the freedom of their daughters. The author shows that how these girls try to seek freedom in their married life, but there as well patriarchy bares its teeth. The post-marriage suppression makes women dominant mothers who exercise their authority over their children, mothers who teach the same language of meekness to their daughters. Githa Hariharan shows us that how the daughter comes to know the reality of the world and started understands the perspective of her mother and family. Finally, she embarks on a journey again to throw away the womanhood imposed on her and to search her self-identity. She explores marital disharmony, broken relationships, mother daughter collision, revolt and loneliness as the result of the imposition of womanhood by patriarchy. The characters like Devi, Sita, Pati, Mayamma, Parvati get the lessons of patriarchy from their families, but they also found the strength from the same family structure.

Keywords : Womanhood, Patriarchy, freedom, suppression, self-Identity

Abbreviation: TTFN- The Thousand Faces of Night

"The situation of woman is that she a free and autonomous being like all human creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other." (Beauvoir 21)

Patriarchy, ideology and tradition are the forces that impose womanhood on Indian woman. In all her novels, Githa Hariharan has presented the forceful imposition. Feminists believe that women suffer at the hands of patriarchy, but Githa Hariharan points out that, not only women but the lives of every member of a family gets affected in one way or the other. The patriarchal ideology force parents to repress the freedom of their daughters. The author shows that how these girls try to seek freedom in their married life, but there as well patriarchy bares its teeth. The post-marriage suppression makes women dominant mothers who exercise their authority over their children, mothers who teach the same language of meekness to their daughters. Along with this, she also portrayed the modern women who do not accept their destiny written by men, but create their own Imposition.

It also deals with the relationship of a female with other females and the strength gained through these relationships. Githa Hariharan shows us that how the daughter comes to know the reality of the world and started to understand the perspective of her mother and family. She explores marital disharmony, broken relationships, mother daughter collision, revolt and loneliness as the result of the imposition of womanhood by patriarchy. The characters like Devi, Sita gets the lessons of patriarchy from their families, but they also found the strength from the same family structure. Finally, she embarks on a journey again to throw away the womanhood imposed on her and to search her self-identity.

The modern women have awakened and are aware of their place, position and strengths. According to Githa Hariharan, patriarchy no longer can control the lives of women with the tool of ideology. The reinterpretation of the mythology and ideology by Indian woman authors and other feminists has paved the way for freedom.

In India, a mother is not equal to a father and a daughter is not equal to a son. Celly Anu expressed in her book Women in Raja Rao's Novel: A Feminist Reading of the Serpent and the Ropethat, "According to the patriarchal tradition prevalent in most of the sections of Hindu society, greater power was handed over to the father, while the mother was supposed to be accorded due respect as the centrifugal and spiritual force of the

family”(Celly 87). Women are expected to be subservient to man and treated like an object or an animal. The word ‘Prayadhan’ (someone else's property) is labelled on a woman right on her birth. Women do not just belong. In Githa Hariharan's novel, *Devi and Sita in The Thousand Faces of Night* suffer at the hands of males, but as modern women, they themselves fight against such supremacy.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Devi*, a modern woman, suffers because of this ideology. She became a victim of the patriarchal system of the family and of her mother, who is also the product of the patriarchal system. Githa Hariharan presents the destiny of women through the character of *Sita*, *Devi's* mother. She shows that how *Sita* was also a happy and free soul, but the system imposed the womanhood on her and converted her into a woman who sacrificed herself. *Sita's* husband *Mahadevan* is not tyrannical, indifferent or irresponsible; he understands the situation of *Sita* but, he cannot do anything because he is also a product of traditional upbringing. He was aware of her situation and wishes, but the lack of courage to confront his father and his patriarchal upbringing made him blind to his wife's sacrifice. He explains his wife's sacrifice for the betterment of his family and acknowledges that *Sita* is a:

...woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifices without fanfare. *Sita* was such a woman, he thought and she had earned his unswerving loyalty. What he did not quite grasp, and when he did it was too late was that a pattern set early in a relationship congeals into a trap. You can't get out of it without causing pain either to yourself or the other person. (TTFN 103)

Sita is an illustration, the pattern of life of many Indian women who conform to the norms of the patriarchal system and become self-sacrificing victims. In such a system, it is believed that after marriage woman should serve and take care of her husband, children and in-laws.

Sita became “an expert at managing things, and even more important, at moulding the most moist and fragile of clay into the most effective shapes” (TTFN 102). *Sita* was a talented *Veena* player who could have reached the peak with her talent, but she was forced to sacrifice her musical talent by her in-laws. *Sita* passively gave up her love for *Veena* and surrenders to the instructions of patriarchy. By suppressing her wishes to be an artist, she became an embodiment of self-sacrifice. She could have revolted against her in-laws, but her traditional upbringing never let her raise her voice, so she pulls the strings of her *Veena*.

The Thousand Faces of Night raises the questions of the subjugation of women in the patriarchal system. Githa Hariharan points out that a woman is a victim of her own willingness to remain subservient. We cannot blame patriarchy alone; women should equally be blamed for perpetuating the patriarchy by not revolting against it and also by governing the weaker women. Patriarchy sets *Sita* and *Savitri* as the role models for a woman and to be the reflection of those characters becomes her sole motive life. *Uma* in her book *Woman and Her Family: Indian and Afro-American : a Literary Perspective* states that the Indian women are:

...inculcated with the ideas of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of *Sita*, *Savitri*, *Gandhari* etc., Following these models, she is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and faithful as a wife, and selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother.(116)

The roles of wife and mother are the destined roles a woman has to play. The mother and the wife are to be blamed for the weakening or the strengthening of the family bond. In the patriarchal system, the mother should give unconditional love to her children and husband and take care of her house without any complaint. In literature and in society as well, the role of a woman is that of a loving mother and wife. *Girija Khanna* and *Mariam Varghese* in their work *Varghese Indian Women Today* said, “The Indian woman, whatever may be her status, sees herself primarily as a mother, and considers this role the most significant one, whatever she does or whatever she achieves is an extension of this primary image”(09).

Devi's mother *Sita* endures the suppression and ill treatment by her father-in-law and does not lose hope even after her husband's death. She tried to live out a life that her name signified. Like the *Sita* of *Ramayana*, she also practices being an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law so much so it hampered the upbringing of *Devi*.

Githa Hariharan feels that a woman becomes the obedient slave to her destiny as written by the patriarchy. The imposition of womanhood annihilates the happiness of an individual and makes her life a burden, which she has to carry her whole life without any complaint.

J.S. Mill points out in *The Subjection of Women* that, “All women are brought up from the very earliest in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men, not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others” (232). *Sita* played very important roles in the lives of *Mahadevan* and *Devi*. She helps her husband with his promotions. She sends *Devi* to America for her education and *Mahadevan* to Africa for the growth of his business. She “banned her mind from trading in

memories, confessions, judgments, the what-could-have-been” (TTFN P107). Her entire focus was on her husband's growth and her daughter's life and buries her own passions. Her husband died suddenly in Africa and left her alone with a loss of her identity. She fits herself completely into the framework of womanhood. She turns into a dominating woman and mother because of the lessons taught by patriarchy to her and because of the domineering attitude of her father-in-law.

Women in Indian patriarchal society believe that their lives are predestined and they peace can be found only by treading on the paths made up for them. Sita blindly surrender to male authority and exhibit a ready willingness to be subordinated. Sita becomes an over-ambitious mother and plays the structured roles assigned to her in an effective manner.

Women accept the discrimination imposed on them by the society because they believe in compromise and do not want to disrupt the relationships in the family. These women become dominant in the case of their daughters. As they have accepted the destiny imposed on the woman, they believe that their daughters will also be not able to fight against that. The final option they follow for their daughters' safety is to get them ready for the discrimination right from their childhood. They do not prepare their daughters to fight against it but mould their personality in such a way that they will accept that discrimination happily. Sita's treatment of Devi is the fine example of such kind of suppression. They impose the womanhood on her with the help of mythological stories. Suman Bala and Subhash Chandrain an article “Manju’s Kapur’s Difficult Daughters: An Absorbing Tale of Fact and Fiction” gave their views in this connection:

The conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughter to be safe. We want them to take the right choices – 'right' in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married. I want my daughters to have good jobs. (107)

Like other women, Devi also tries to compromise for the happiness of her father-in-law, her mother and her husband, Mahesh, but after a point, she sets the roles of obedient wife and daughter-in-law aside and moves forward. She is obedient in the beginning, but becomes assertive later. Devi respects her mother and follows her instructions. She sends Devi to America for education, but does not wait for the start of her career. Instead, she wants Devi to get married. Devi does not want to marry, but she puts emotional pressure on her convinces her, because like every Indian mother, she believes only marriage makes life of a woman perfect.

In America, Devi is proposed to by her African-American friend Dan, but she refuses it and returns to India for helping her mother. Promptly, her mother takes her to the altar. She even allows her mother to choose a groom for her and finally she gets married to Mahesh. Devi has a smooth relationship with her mother until her marriage, but it gets impaired when Sita starts acting as a representative of patriarchy. With his patriarchal attitude, her husband destroys all her dreams. This creates a feeling of low self-esteem and of worthlessness in Devi.

Indian woman is trained and expected to make all the adjustments for the success of a marriage; man, on the other hand, is not expected to do so. Devi enters her new house with numerous dreams and expectations which are shattered one by one. For her marriage, is the union of two souls, but her husband does not think so.

After marriage, she realizes that how difficult it is to cope with loneliness. Her life is filled with loneliness and boredom; she spends “hours every afternoon opening dusty rooms and cockroach ridden cupboards” (TTFN 59). She tried to let Mahesh know about the suffocation she is suffering, but Mahesh never showed any interest or care for her.

Devi was unable to understand the whole scenario of married life. Her grandmother and mother tried their best to set the ideology and prepare her for these situations with the help of stories, but Devi's interpretations were different from that of her grandmother, but still these impositions make Devi confused and question her identity.

Mahesh forces her to get pregnant, but she is not interested in bearing a child for him. Due to the pressure from him, she agrees to go to a doctor for a check-up. Devi's frustration can be seen, when she says “now I am really a woman: a mother in my receding past, a husband before me. I must follow his self-contained footprints, with the clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves” (TTFN 84). Githa Hariharan wanted to show how this kind of torture reduces the self-confidence of a modern educated woman day. Many women dream of a happy married life full of love and passion, but they are always shocked by the reality of marriage in the patriarchal setup.

Devi desires to give birth to the children for a husband who understands her, loves her passionately and respects her emotions; but not for Mahesh. Women desire equality, love, and passion in their married life, which the male dominated society is not ready to give.

Devi feels like a bird in a golden cage. She yearns for freedom but just cannot fly away. In the Indian patriarchal society, an unsatisfied married woman just cannot break the ties with her husband go back to her house. Devi's struggle starts after her marriage and each and every step that she takes leads her toward the loss of identity.

Her Pati teaches her the rules with the help of myriad stories from mythology – the stories of Sita, Damayanti, Ganga, Amba, etc. In doing so, Pati tries to prepare her for her future roles. Not only Pati, but Devi's father-in-law, Baba, also teaches her the qualities of a good woman. His stories are not mythical, but are related to real life. Devi asserts that her grandmother stories are like 'prelude to her womanhood' but Baba's stories are to teach her the limits of a woman or a wife. Both of them try to prepare Devi for the role of an ideal wife, but Devi thwarted all their efforts. Their efforts go in vain because of Devi's positive attitude. Baba tries to quash her modern thoughts by narrating his own life history, which is purely from the viewpoint of a male.

In spite of these impositions by Pati and Baba, Devi is not ready to surrender her identity or sacrifice her individuality. She understood that the meaning attributed to the stories are biased and reinterprets it in her own way. Not being able to bear the torture of her married life anymore, she decides to run away from the tyrannical bonds of marriage. The meaninglessness of her married life led her to fly away with Gopal, the artist. She doesn't want to live a life of sadness and misery like Sita. She says, "I will soar high on the crest of Gopal's ragas and what if I fall with a thud, alone, the morning after? I will walk on, seeking a goddess whom not yet made" (TTFN 95).

Her elopement with Gopal is the symbol of her revolt against the patriarchal system of marriage that crushes the dignity of woman, but life with Gopal also proves to be a failure. Devi chose Gopal because she expected him to bring her self-confidence and self-identity back, but she doesn't find her true self with Gopal. Gopal's attitude toward woman is also chauvinistic. Mahesh is wedded to his job and Gopal to music. She rejects Gopal again and walks away from yet another tyrannical wedlock. Her rejection of her second partner is the symbol of rebellion, which is not expected of a woman in the conventional society. Githa Hariharan presents a courageous woman who is not bothered about what the society would think and revolts against the discrimination and changes the rules and norms of the patriarchal system.

Women's writing in the modern world has reached an all-time high; India is no exception. Feminist writings are divided into two parts - 'conservative' and 'progressive'. Githa Hariharan belongs to the progressive school of thinking. To her, human values are always on a top. Her strategies strengthen women and protect them and make them protest boldly against the orthodoxy of patriarchal society.

WORKCITED

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