



EXISTENTIAL CHOICES IN HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan, as a post-colonial novelist, reveal her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who are smothered in a male dominated society. In the present novel also, she highlights their inferior position and subsequent degradation in the male dominated society. The women in the novel try to regain their balance by making certain existential choices . Sita, her mother's choice of her unhappy life in a muted silence, is another variety of feminism. She dominates her husband silently, prods him on for promotions and as Amba has her revenge in the Mahabharata, she too destroys her poor husband. Devi's returning to India at her mother's invitation and her marriage with Mahesh which proves to be total disaster. After realizing the great gap between both of them, she takes a bold step in becoming the mistress of Gopal. But his ego and self centredness again make her lose interest in him and she is faced by the final dilemma: whether to drift away like a torn kite or to return home to her mother. She makes the second choice and proves herself to be a modern, conscious woman who refuses to take the usual path of compromise with the male-dominated setup around her for asserting her freedom. But her unusual choice to go back to the mother for whom she does not have much love seems to be a sign of confusion. Hariharan seems to indicate here the modern woman's confused condition through Devi's and Sita's character.

INTRODUCTION

Githa Hariharan is a post-colonial novelist of great repute whose contribution to Indian fiction in English has added a new dimension to it. She wrote novels, short story collections etc. She has been translated into several languages and her stories and essays have been published in collections and anthologies such as *'Mirrorwork : 50 Years Of Indian Writing 1947-1997*. Her literary work began with the publication of the novel 'The Thousand Faces



of Night' (1992). As this book won the first Commonwealth Writer's Prize of 1993, she became famous. The novel is a story of a woman who experiences unhappiness of marriage taking it to be a prison to be broken. She walks out of it and joins her mother in whose company she would seek fulfillment and would complete her quest for identity outside marriage. Her protest against the traditional patriarchal male dominated system throws light upon her leaning towards feminist thinking and activist personality

An important aspect of feminism is the search for identity undertaken by the female characters of the novels. Hariharan also shows her fictional women becoming aware of the new woman's modern orientation. This search for identity makes the woman aware of their existential predicament. The traditional values of patriarchal social set up deny the woman every kind of freedom. The modern woman is expected to make her 'choices' regarding crucial issues about her family and relationships. A consideration of the choices made by traditional women could be contrasted with those made by the new women. The difference between the two sets will indicate different orientation. Hariharan's novel presents a fine contrast between these 'choices' which could be called 'existential'. Of course, the adjective simply suggests 'that which is related with the characters' 'existence'. The elaborate philosophy of 'existentialism' is not applicable here. But 'choices' do indicate consequences which trigger off yet newer 'choices' and so forth and so on. Choices do work towards shaping the women's identity.

In the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan portrayed the oldest among all the women that is Devi's grandmother. She is a graceful old lady, wise with traditional wisdom which she has gathered from age-old myths, stories and folk tales. She wishes that Devi, her grand daughter would learn from these 'stories' and adjust her life to become an ideal woman.

Considering the condition of women in those times, the grandmother seems surprisingly individualistic and open in her outlook. She interprets in her own way, the ancient myths and legends which are supposed to set role models for women. Her interpretations are refreshing as they underline the individuality of women as human beings. She has accepted her traditional life on its own terms and conditions but wants Devi to reinterpret her position in the light of old stories.

Sita has been playing the assigned role as a wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and mother but entirely on her own terms. She is a strong willed woman, and achieved what she wants.

In the Indian society, woman is seen only in relation to man, she has no life of her own. The concept of marriage as a sacrament and a permanent union affects her life. To have a

husband was the greatest blessing for a woman even if he was evil. Society recognized woman only through her husband. A single woman had no status in society.

The present novel depicts the tragedy of women in their inner mind as they react to the bondage of male domination. Sita's, the mother of Devi, attracts reader's attention. She invests herself by effacing herself in denying her 'womanness' but at the same time, she tries to become an ideal wife and daughter-in-law.

Woman in India is entrapped into the inescapable cage of 'being a woman, wife, mother.' A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood. Otherwise, she is perceived as useless and unworthy. According to the traditional Indian views, woman doesn't appear to have her independent note in society. She must be a male appendix in order to have a role, and so as a good housewife, she decides to become an expert in managing everything. She sets out to organize her own life. In the novel, the writer uses the garden metaphor to symbolize Sita's progress towards realization. Each decision that she makes was an assertion of her own worth. Her husband, Mahadevan, was interested in folklore, but she crushes it and reshapes him as she wanted. She has succeeded in reaching her goal of wifehood with a dogged determination and relentless self-discipline, leading her husband more like a 'conductor' than an 'accompanist'.(103)

She is a woman who hates all illusions. She achieves what she determines whether it is to put her Veena away or to get rid of Annapurna. The position of woman in the house is her sole right. She cannot entertain any other woman in it. When Sita realizes that Annapurna had tried to enter in her family, her calculated moves drive the rival out. Her achievement as a housewife, wife and mother is rather superficial because it is not her goal. She wants to present her protest in it. She has distanced herself from her 'dreamer' husband and 'elusive' daughter. They both allow themselves to be ruled by her but not without resentment and anger. Her husband dies alone as if he doesn't want to share with her even his last struggle. Thus her choice to become a good housewife is not successful. Then, Sita found an acquisition in her daughter, Devi. In India, a daughter is the alter ego of her mother. The mother wants to realize her unfulfilled dreams through her daughter.

Devi, in America, was impressed by Dan, her Negro friend. But she used him as a shield against "the white claustrophobia of an all-clean, all-American campus."(3) She knew that her enjoyment with him 'is necessarily dependent on her inability to conceive a life with him.' (6)

When Devi returns to India, Sita decides to arrange her marriage an arranged 'Swayamvara'. Devi likes Mahesh's frankness and chooses him as a husband. He was too Indian where Dan was too unIndian. Her relationship with Mahesh gives her a superficial freedom. In India,



life-partners are chosen by the parents, they arrange for the two young souls to live happily ever after. Sahgal (1977:25) attacks these social conventions and names this kind of marriage 'just organized rape'. Sita's marriage to Mahadevan and Devi's to Mahesh was that type. They found emptiness in their marital life.

Devi belongs to the third generation, but is linked with first and second generation also. Had she lived in America, she would have shed her inhibitions' her burden of Indianness. Even in the liberated, non-restrictive situations in America, she feels separateness because of the "myth-laden world that had soaked up her past." (6)

Marriage for her becomes a trap which negates her individuality. The basis for a happy marriage is the feeling of sharing equality. But in patriarchal society, equality is not possible because all the good or positive qualities are attributed to men and the qualities associated with women are considered to be inferior.

After marriage, she tries to find a fruitful diversion to keep herself busy and voices her aspirations to Mahesh. But Mahesh's callousness and insistence gives rise to vulnerability, his insistence to bear a child seemed to Devi an enforcement of the 'roles' prescribed for a woman when she becomes a wife. She realizes that her choice was wrong. She is a 'wooden puppet' in his hands. When she fails to get pregnant, he begins to torture her. He is unable to provide her security and safety and stability too. She is no longer warm and safe. She grows agitated and introspective and unable to arrive at a solution.

Devi is listener of Baba's stories also. She is inspired by Amba and Durga. Baba tried to keep away those books from Devi, but it appealed to Devi the most. So she decides to take a decision. She left that cage and went away with Gopal, a musician. Now Devi is a woman who is conscious of her emotional needs and strives for self-fulfillment rejecting the traditions and social customs and long for more liberal and unconventional ways of life. Devi wants to establish a new life with Gopal. Devi was traditional in her way of living but modern in outlook and capacity to retain her individuality.

She goes with Gopal because she has an impression that she likes him. Gopal takes her along on all his concert tours. At that time, she remembered about Mahesh and his behaviour with her. Unlike Mahesh, Gopal shares his professional plans and aspirations with her. But again, she feels alienated because they belong to two different worlds. Devi belongs to the world of darkness and Gopal of limelight. With Gopal, she feels lonely and lost. Here one thing is clear that her husband, Mahesh and now Gopal are abusive and violent. It is the lack of mental and emotional compatibility which disrupt the ties binding them. Gopal is happy with himself. When he tries to recognize her individuality, it compels her to go away in search of her 'self'. And again she protests and asserts herself.

She realizes that Gopal was also a beautiful despot, who cannot see beyond either passion of raga or the various masks of her discrete lives.

Now Devi in search of a new way of life she decides to return to her mother, Sita. Devi's covering of the mirror with her silk sari as she finally leaves a sleeping Gopal is symbolic of her rejection of herself as well as rejection of Gopal.

Devi's choice is to leave Dan and close doors on America brings her to India. Her choice of Mahesh as a husband brings in disillusionment on account of male patriarchal mindset. Then she boldly asserts her freedom by running away with Gopal, the musician. But here too she is not happy. Her incompatibility with his self-centered nature makes her turn her back on him. But this time tired of taking bold steps, she goes back and walks in her mother's house. This final 'choice' is perhaps the novelist's statement on the meaning of marriage for the modern woman. But one wonders at the confusion in the mind of Devi as she goes from one existential choice to another!

This makes the novel a polyphonic and interesting text which comments on the writer's feministic perspective in an artistic manner. Although the heroine appears to be confused about her 'identity' she is surrounded by different voices on feminism drawn from history, folklore, myth and lived reality. This makes the novel a great work of art.

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