

The Thousand Faces of Night: Mythical Overtones Of Contemporary Woman

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The Indian Women Writers of the 1980s seem to be assertive to acquire their identity in the male-dominated society. The novels of these writers, though generally set in family background, are a study of the conditions, social domestic and economic in which the life of the contemporary woman has been set. At different levels—social, political, cultural, economic and religious—the writings of women writers have been studied. Adrienne Rich considers women's writing as 'Re-vision'. In her words Re-vision is 'act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us (women) more than a chapter in critical history' (Rich, 1972, p. 13-18). The act of re-vision evolves a remaking of the past and re-invention of a new tradition and it also turns itself in an act of creation. Under the name of re-making, old stories came to be told in different ways from gynocentric perspectives such remaking of the stories is definitely a strategy formulated for the cause of women's liberation in the patriarchal society.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* projects its heroine's struggle for identity. The novelist has successfully, juxtaposed and intermingled the lives of three women, a young, foreign-returned girl, Devi, her mother, Sita who is artistically bent towards music, and old caretaker Mayamma. Mayamma and Sita seem to be the typical ideal women bound to mythical concepts of the women whereas Sita's search for her identity doesn't allow her to be a part of the mythical set up. It is observed, at the same time, that Devi's life has the impact of mythical model of a woman. She has formulated this model through the stories of the grandmother. It seems that throughout her life, Devi is engulfed by the mythical narration either of her grandmother or the old caretaker-cum-governess-cum-cook at her husband's house.

Since ages woman has been regarded as commodity. It is just due to the ignorance of the fair gender that they were submissive and they tried to prove themselves ideal as the mythical image of a woman. In mythology, a woman is presented as the queen of house. She is loving, care-taking, child bearing and sympathetic. It is only because she has the quality to procreate, she has been regarded as a goddess. This position has been given to a woman by the patriarchally dominated society. To such a position of a woman, some other person of the same gender is responsible. A daughter is trained from her childhood to do this and not to do that. She even doesn't have the right to make choice in her own marriage. Having been born in such family background, Mayamma is married at the age of twelve years to a man who is having all the bad habits in his life.

At the marriage ceremony, the priest gives blessing to her to be the mother of brave sons. Mayamma's husband, after the marriage welcomes her in very soft words displaying all his intense emotions:

I am the world and your are the melody; I am the melody and you are the word. I am heaven, you are earth. I am seed, you are bearer. I am the thought, you are the word. Let me lead you, so that we may bear a son. (Hariharan, 1992, p. 80)

This is what a woman is destined to her position mythologically. What Mayamma experiences in life is quite different from what she has understood mythologically. All her concepts of becoming a good wife have been shattered within two years of her marriage. She has been accused by her mother-in-law to be an barren woman she fails to give birth to a son. Only eight years after the marriage, her husband turns a middle-aged man who disappears taking all the money in the home. She remains to live her husband's replica in the form of a son. From his childhood, he uses to threaten her. At the age of fourteen years, *he threatened to beat his mother and sold her pair of gold bangles.* (81) Mayamma remains an ideal for a conventional woman. When her son falls ill, she takes every care as a mother. She weeps too much at his death. When nothing remains with her, she leaves her house and decides to remain with Devi's mother-in-law, Parvatiamma. Devi observes Mayamma's life as:

Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand. She had had no choices really. (p. 135-136)

She continues to live through other woman like Paravtiamma and Devi herself.

Sita, Devi's mother in fact, fits closely to the mythological description of ideal woman. As her name suggests, Sita is symbolic of an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. When she has married, she enters the house of in-laws with twenty thousand rupees as her dowry and veena which she likes the most. Playing on the *veena*, she uses to treat as *sadhana*. Devis's grandmother describes the event how Sita discarded playing on *veena*. Her father-in-law questions her of her being dutiful. Just to obey her duty as a faithful and loyal daughter-in-law, she abandons her *sadhana*. Sita continues her effort to make her husband satisfied with her. She represents herself as following the path of a *pativarta*. Having cut herself off from the practice and *sadhana* of *veena*, she takes her husband 'by the hand and led him from promotion to promotion till he was within the exclusive circle of fast rising executives who brought home three thousand a month' (p. 104).

Sita has before her the models of ideal mythological woman such as Gandhari and Gauri from whose life, tells Mayamma, to Devi, she has learnt that—

All hands are noble...Even the blind and deaf one. (p. 29)

Sita has shaped the life of her daughter, Devi. As a cool, self-confident, middle-aged woman, she welcomes her daughter back from the US. She arranges a *swayamwara* for her daughter. As a responsible woman, she invites all her relatives to attend Devi's marriage. Sita's every act seems to be a move towards her destined role ordained by centuries of social conventions. She receives the shock of her husband's sudden death while on a pasting in Africa. She even manages to marry Devi so as to send her to '*a more prominent destination*' (p. 107)

From her childhood, Devi has been fed on the stories of Gandhari, Damayanti, Uma, Amba, princes and princess. Listening these stories, Devi grows up more certain of a different new world. She remains abroad in the world of freedom and liberty. She continues to be a dreamer. In dreams and visions, she enjoys the intimacy of the mythical heroines. She has a contact with deities and entities of the different world. She transforms herself into a woman warrior ordained for special role—the redemption of her race.

Devi has been married to Mahesh and shifted to a huge house which only Mahesh and Devi, Mahesh's father Baba and the caretaker Mayamma continue to live. Though she has been well-married Devi's marital life lacks the colour and excitement which she has

expected. As a matter of fact, Mahesh doesn't have romantic sense. *He has been a 'regional manager of a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste'* (p. 22). He makes tours frequently and expects nothing special or exciting out of the marriage. Devi's all dreams of marriage have been shattered as she continues to live with Baba, her father-in-law. After Baba's death, she feels alone. Devi describes her condition before Mahesh:

I spend hours every afternoon, opening dusty rooms and cockroach-ridden cupboards. (p. 59)

Devi desired to take up a job or continue another degree is discouraged. It seems that Mahesh doesn't want Devi to her individual identity. Mahesh has never been in favour of Devi's education in particular and women education in general. He says:

This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want? (p. 74)

Devi as a contemporary woman justifies her side:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible. (p. 74)

In spite of the fact that she doesn't have much physical attraction, Devi spends sleepless nights and she finally decides "I must learn to love" (p. 78), and she decides to go away from Mahesh's life. She seems to be determined to live with Gopal, an engrossed musician. She doesn't find anything specific in his as her presence or absence doesn't make any difference to him at all. Devi shatters all her dreams of mythological woman and decides to go back to the mainland of sorrow and suffering with Mahesh. She seems to be determined '*to stay and fight, to make sense of it all*' (p. 139). She realizes her existence in this world as her mother's wild and overgrown garden.

The title, *The Thousand Faces of Night* is suggestive of the modern woman's condition in life. The existence of woman in Indian society is as dark as the night. The novel reveals thousands of stories each representing a face as dark as the night itself. The lives and existence of the three woman characters as presented in the novel no are more different than the darkness itself. As anybody bumps down in the darkness, the females in the novel bump down. They do not have any direction to move on. The model of an ideal mythological woman only remains a model.

References:

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