



Post-Colonial and Feminist Perspectives in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan's first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), highlights the survival strategies of women belonging to three different generations. The protagonist of the novel, Devi, being the youngest of the three, is the US-return modern woman who ends up in a bitter marriage. Another powerful character in the novel is her mother Sita, who strives for her self-assertion by aspiring to bridge the widening gap between tradition and modernity. Mayamma, being the last, is the old family retainer in Devi's husband's house, and is a real typical instance for women's exploitation by patriarchal society. She belongs to the distant past with her affixed location in the suffocating tradition and whose pathetic life displays that for an Indian woman, married life becomes a success only if she endures all the torture heaped on her without retort.

Keywords

Post-Colonialism; Patriarchy; Hegemony; Githa Hariharan; *The Thousand Faces of Night*.



Introduction

Though patriarchy and colonialism are quite different from each other, there is a singular commonality and that is hegemony. Patriarchy is exerting control over a family, whereas colonialism is exerting control over a nation. Post-Colonialism is the residual impact of colonisation that transcends the social structure. Indian society is essentially a caste-based patriarchal society. Colonial impact on this fractured society, has left indelible scars on women and pushed women further outside the margins.

Colonial India was a part of the Indian Sub-continent, which was under the control of European colonial powers, through trade and conquest. Though India freed herself from the shackles of the British in 1947, it is to be borne in mind that the association between these two nations had been for nearly three hundred and fifty years. As far as socio-political consciousness of India was concerned these years are to be termed as crucial years in Indian history. It is true that the impact of the colonial culture is still being felt and experienced in decolonized societies. Colonialism is part and parcel of the dynamics of power functioning in any human situation.

According to the definitions of the dictionaries, colonialism is a practice through which a powerful entity dominates over a powerless entity. In other words, the powerful country imposes its dominance over the less powerful one and plunder and exploit its wealth and resources, to suit their interest. Of late, it is not the political colonialism alone that constitutes power which dominates and exploits. Thus, the word itself has gained very many manifestations as power politics and exploitation are inborn human qualities and post-colonialism is one of its kinds.

A vast majority of post-colonial writings focus on recovery of the self and the native culture from the dominance of the coloniser. The second generation Indian English fiction can comfortably be viewed under four different aspects: Feminist discourse, Ethno-religious or Minority discourse, Diaspora discourse and political and ideological discourse. Feminism has become one of the most far-reaching movements this world has ever witnessed. Its influence has been

felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide. Indeed, feminism has achieved the dubious distinction of becoming a familiar part of our cultural landscape. The work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women's demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and re-writing the history of India.

Postcolonial writers aim to recover the self and the native culture from the dominance of the colonizer. The post-colonial approach to the novel helps to understand the records of history highlights the fact that we have long lost our originality.

Whenever colonization is a fact, the indigenous culture begins to rot. And among the ruins something begins to be born which is not a culture but a kind of subculture which is condemned to exist on the margin. - Aime Cessaire

Githa Hariharan, with such craftsmanship and sensibility of the creative artist has attempted to expose the cultural conglomeration and conflict through her works. She project the large society as a whole through her characters. But her novel work mainly to awakening of woman's consciousness which impels her to strive for self-actualization.

Indian Patriarchy

Githa Hariharan has dealt with the pathetic condition of women in Indian society oppressed by superstitions, myths, religion and marriage. Her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents the effects of patriarchy on women of different social classes and ages and particularly, the varied responses to the restrictive institution of marriage. However, a peep into the ancient times seems to reveal interesting facts on women's status. Women enjoyed a much advanced status, where matriarchy was the rule. It is believed that the family of early humans centered on the mother. Female deities were prioritised.

A patriarchal social setup firmly asserts men's superiority over women and is based not on mutuality, but on oppression. Although women have played a crucial role in the creation of society and have been active agents in history, the patriarchal thought has spared no effort to relegate them to margins. Polygamy

and child marriage had become common. While the birth of a daughter was considered to be inauspicious, that of a son was an occasion for rejoicing. Women underwent trials and tribulations and were at the mercy of their masculine counterparts. Men looked down upon women as the creator of their race and no major roles were allotted to them, besides procreation and upbringing of progeny. They were considered as instruments of the satisfaction of carnal lusts by landlords, victors and invaders.

It is to be noted that later, the industrial revolution in India had its impact on women psyche and thoughts. It totally changed the outlook of many affluent women on life. It created consciousness about their rights and the potential women rose up. This made women to come to the forefront of political scenario during the late 19th century.

Quest for Identity

Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), which has won the Commonwealth Prize for the First best book, highlights the survival strategies of women belonging to three different generations. Devi is the protagonist of the novel being the youngest of the three. She has returned from the US and is trapped in a bitter marriage. In her frantic attempts to be an ideal wife and daughter-in-law, Devi gradually loses her individuality. She lives like a stranger in her own home. Man and woman need each other's love for maintaining a harmony in their physical and mental health. But, her attempts are neither appreciated, nor recognized by her husband, Mahesh. Her husband is always on tours and remains a shadowy stranger, who views marriage just as another necessity.

Gradually Devi discovers the fact that Mahesh does not care to love her and at the same he does not recognize her efforts to love him. In fact, he scorns at her education whenever an argument arises between them. Mahesh questioned, "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely illiterate. Wasn't she a happy woman than you are?" (*The Thousand Faces of Night* 40). Devi feels that her education, which is a residue of colonialism has not prepared her to face Mahesh's supreme confidence and superciliousness.

Mahesh never takes any initiative to spend adequate time with Devi. Thus, it clearly indicates that Mahesh, a male-chauvinist could never think his wife to be on par with him. His understanding of marriage is just a means to procreate.

Such motive and mind-set of Mahesh, prompted Devi to take revenge on him. Her strong urge for revenge is manifested in different forms. She identifies herself with Durga, a Hindu Goddess, who is believed to be the destroyer of evil. She says, “I lived a life of my own. I become a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demon’s heads” (*The Thousand Faces of Night* 41).

She soon becomes frustrated and develops emotional pain and privation due to her conflict with the patriarchal ideals instilled within her due to patriarchal conditioning. She tries her level best to compromise with Mahesh to continue their marriage. But all her efforts go in vain because Mahesh is insistent that they must have a baby and Devi discovers that she cannot conceive. He ultimately neglects all her emotional needs. Devi’s recoil made her to rebound. She gets attracted towards Gopal, an Indian singer and ultimately elopes with him. It is Mahesh’s rude, selfish and self-centred attitude that has forced her to fall for another man. Gopal’s sense of love and care has diverted her attention towards him. She went away with Gopal hoping to find her own emotion’s voice through music. She realizes Gopal too cannot see beyond his passion for music. The fascination of the new relationship comes to an end with this realization. The two choices that Devi has made resulted in creating an unfathomable void in her life.

By leaving Mahesh, she emerges as an emancipated woman. After that she feels like a fugitive escaping from captivity until self-actualization dawns on her, when she finally unites with her mother. The novel reflects the continuing and inherent tension between the reinforcement of traditions and the resistance to recurrent cultural patterns. Hariharan seems to attribute Mahesh’s arrogance to the embedded conceptions about a woman’s role in Indian male-psyche and women’s powerlessness against the dominant mental attitude of India. She negotiates the feminist issues across various contradictions of India.

Another powerful character in the novel is Devi's mother Sita, who strives for assertion by aspiring to bridge the widening gap between tradition and modernity. Mayamma, being the last, is the old family retainer in Devi's husband's house, and is a typical instance of women's exploitation by patriarchal society. She belongs to the distant past with her affixed location in the suffocating tradition. Her pathetic life mirrors the plight of Indian woman. Married life becomes a success only if she endures all the torture heaped on her without retort. Hariharan, through this novel, which is in fact a collage – like work, records her deep sense of anguish against the Indian patriarchal ideologies that subjugate women to the core. Phrases like 'virtuous lady', 'ideal wife', 'ideal daughter-in-law' in fact are devices propagated by the patriarchal structure to subjugate woman. From yonder years till the present day, these ideologies have been passed on, that even elite, educated men adhere to them seriously and fail to acknowledge that a woman is indeed an individual human with all emotions and feelings.

Hariharan as a post-colonial writer in true terms, has beautifully encapsulated the nature of the identity of the subordinate-self, the manner of its fight against the dominant subordinate-self and the very many possibilities of its recovery, where there is humane treatment to all and where the strong do not dominate, oppress, exploit the 'other'. She has emphasized the alternative adopted by the subordinate-self to revive its self and redefine its marginal position. The novelist pin-points the current sexist practices that make women subservient. The women protagonists of these novels encounter oppressive men, who emanate from patriarchal social order. They comprehend that these societal norms and taboos are highly stressing and all the same suffocating.

Githa Hariharan's attempts to unleash the different degrees of adjustments, opposition, resistance and struggle, of her women characters, and thereby she points out the lack of flexibility in patterns of social organisation and the high levels of frustration and suffering experienced by women. She has succeeded in putting forth through her work that certain definite reforms can be initiated to uplift the aspirations of women.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan is known for her bold and frank style of writing because her writing deals with issues concerning the modern society. Githa Hariharan's vision encompasses the whole history of woman's role in cultural labyrinth and edifies the emergence of a new woman, who is true to her own self. All the three women in the novel attempt their best to brave the strong oppositions and create a space for their own lives. They achieve different levels of satisfaction depending upon their inherent nature. The psyches of women belonging to different age groups and different social status have been highlighted. Hariharan's Devi created a new breed of woman-protagonists, who are neither loyal, committed traditionalists nor ultra-modern, but life-like. Such women have rediscovered and redefined their identity as new women.

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