

**RE-PRESENTATION OF MYTHS: A READING OF GITHA  
HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT***

**DR. CLARAMMA JOSE**

LOYOLA COLLEGE,  
CHENNAI, INDIA

**MRS. MYTHILIMUKUND**

MAHARSHIDAYANAND COLLEGE,  
MUMBAI, INDIA

**Abstract**

*Feminist theories structured the shape of the feminist debate in the 1980s. These theories identify and deconstruct stereotypes, create resistance to the ideologies promoted by them and encourage women to seek alternative ways of life. Re-presentation no longer remained simple 'looking back' but evolved into a remaking of the past and reinvention of a new tradition. With the stress on the feminist ideology, gender injustice and the role of women in the Indian society, the female discourse in the 1980's reflects myth busting and remaking of the Indian myths from a female perspective. Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* may best be read as a part of re-presentation of myth making programme one finds in women's text. This paper is an attempt to compare the various legends of the mythical heroines narrated to the protagonist Devi by her Grandmother, the stories of Pativratas recounted to her by her Father-in-law and real life experiences observed by Devi and sometimes narrated by her housekeeper Mayamma. It is also an attempt at understanding the new sacred place created by Hariharan within the old discourse.*

**Key words:** Mythical heroines, grandmother, Devi, Baba, discourse.

**RE-PRESENTATION OF MYTHS: A READING OF GITHA  
HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT***

-DR. CLARAMMA JOSE

-MRS. MYTHILIMUKUND

**I**n the galaxy of Indian English fiction, Githa Hariharan rationalizes the myths to evolve an assertive tradition of feminist fiction. As Shashi Deshpande says:

“How we see ourselves collectively or individually depend greatly on myths. They are the part of human psyche; part of our cultural histories. Myths condition our ideas so greatly that often it is difficult to disentangle the reality of what we learn of ourselves through them.”

The prominence of women in legends in India signifies that female identity has always been an integral part of socio-religious thought in all ages. The mythical heroines like Sita, Savitri etc. are so internalized that they have become a part of human psyche and most of the feminist discourse is constructed according to them. Githa Hariharan does not seem to be convinced by the illusions existing behind these images and has recreated these myths with a challenging interrogation to patriarchal authority. She re-presents and redefines the myths to give voice to the suppressed female consciousness.

A myth is typically understood as an ancient story or a false idea that camouflages an underlying reality. However, neither of these adequately problematise its circulation in culture and society. Roland Barthes' account of myth, which he developed through the studies of French popular culture in the 1950s, is more appropriate, since he takes their linguistic dimension into account. As Barthes encapsulates myth has a double function:

“Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them out, lays them out, the master

arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: it can only come from eternity....”

Githa Hariharan’s first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* brilliantly blends myth and reality. The text presents us with three women whose different and yet similar stories cut across generations, caste and class to lead to female bonding. The young, upper class, western educated Devi, her middle-aged but educated mother Sita and the lower caste servant woman Mayamma have to contend with the same restrictive rules of patriarchy. The comparison between the re-presentation of stories heard by the protagonist Devi from her grandmother and father-in-law reveal the difference in the mythological stories internalized by them and their different interpretations.

If Manu speaks of female subordination, the grandmother’s discourse glorifies strong, rebellious and angry women-Draupadi and Amba from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*-whose wrath wreaked havoc and destroyed male-controlled dynasties. As Githa Hariharan says in the prelude:

‘I must have asked my grandmother why? thousands of times... the answers I now reconstruct were perhaps never really hers. Perhaps I put the oracular, paradoxical words into her generous, buck-toothed mouth each time I recall the fables of childhood.’

The paternalistic laws of Manu, the ancient Indian sage, run like a disturbing thread through the text and give female subordination the legitimacy of religious dogma. These laws are articulated at intervals by Devi’s father-in-law. As Nilufer Bharucha says, ‘this dominant male discourse is however subverted by Devi’s grandmother’s female discourse’.

It is a novel in which the protagonist Devi does not live happily after marriage but grows resentful of the restrictions of the domestic enclosure. Finally she asserts her freedom walking out of the prison of marriage. Devi, a young girl educated in the United States returns to India at the behest of her mother Sita. As her mother prepares her to meet the prospective bridegrooms, Devi recalls the time spent with the grandmother during her childhood and the story of Damayanti and her Swayamvara which she ‘listened, rapt, my

seven year old mind thrilling at the splendours that awaited me.' She also recollects the time spent with Dan, her boyfriend in America and her meeting with prospective bridegrooms to see if there is some connection which would link these too obstinately disparate chapters of her life.

With the help of intertextuality ranging from the tales from the *Mahabharata* to folk stories and interweaving these stories with the lives of real women, Githa Hariharan has created a new dimension and a new milestone in Indian fiction in English. Devi listens to the older story tellers- her grandmother, Mayamma and her father-in-law Baba and turns a narrator herself. She rewrites these stories within her own life story and recreates the forgotten women with their stories paying a rich tribute to her mentors.

The name 'Devi' means 'goddess' and refers to the Absolute Divine Power in Hindu mythology. It is through her grandmother that Devi's artistic vision is first unleashed and her creative yearnings are nurtured. Devi's grandmother imparts a secret knowledge to her through a purposeful presenting of the tales of the forgotten women of the past- Damayanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who are re-presented in the real life-like characters by Devi.

Devi's grandmother does not tell her the stories of the prominent heroines like Sita or Savitri often celebrated as paragons of female virtue. On the contrary, she tells her the stories of Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who are almost forgotten and invisible in patriarchal versions of myth. But all these women incidentally have great fury in them and have staged their protest against exploitation in their own powerful ways.

Gandhari's anger is hid behind the thick bondage she tied over her own eyes opting to share the darkness of her blind husband's world. Gandhari's story is reflected in the life of Sita, Devi's mother. Looking at her mother's photograph, Devi's grandmother relates as to how Sita stops playing veena. Sita cannot hear her father-in-law's call, as she has been playing veena and he roars by saying, 'Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?' Sita breaks the strings of the veena in protest and says, 'Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-

in-law'. She represses her desire and devotes herself to the family with her suppressed anger.

Another story told by her grandmother deals with the way in which a beautiful girl marries a snake. The story delineates the Hindu concept of rebirth. Devi co-relates this story with that of the maid servant Gauri whose husband's family ill treats her and she elopes with her brother-in-law who has leucoderma.

Amba is a female avenger, who transformed the fate that overtook her, into a triumph and avenged herself against the offender Bheeshma. Devi's grandmother re-presents the story of Amba and Bheeshma when they discuss about their cousin Uma's marriage, her husband and father-in-law who are drunkards and the terror of her drunken father-in-law kissing her. As Devi herself admits:

' But my grandmother's stories began around this time to take on a sharper, more precarious tone of dangerous possibilities...It was impossible to hear her stories year after year, stories of a womanhood I would soon grow into, without insinuating myself onto that fantastic canvas. I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads.'

Hariharan's moving description of the magical intimacy between Devi and her grandmother is symbolic of many possibilities that are open to women through the important mentor figures, role models and inspired women present among them. She does not listen to her grandmother's stories silently. She keeps questioning her and later on retells and re-presents the stories connecting them to the women of her own life.

Mayamma, the maid servant in her husband Mahesh's house play an important role in Devi's life. Mayamma narrates her own story of how she is ill-treated for being childless and her predicament after begetting a child. She learns the strategies of survival as she herself puts it: 'I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry.'

Another narratorial voice that retrieves the past for Devi is that of her father-in-law Baba. Devi marries Mahesh, a regional manager in a multinational company. He travels a lot and does not find much time to spend with Devi. He 'admits to wanting a woman at home who will be a wife and a mother'. When she is alone at home, she gets to converse with her father-in-law who is a sanskrit scholar. The emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her closer to Baba. He narrates many stories about womanhood and the duties of a wife in a household.

While talking about his marriage, he recalls as to how he chose Parvati over Hema and Mohana as their names sounded 'frivolous...back-chatting, tantrum-throwing, modern girls'. He considers the name Parvati as old and reliable. Referring to 'filial piety' he feels proud that he has seen his wife for the first time on their wedding day. Mayamma describes Parvati as a very beautiful and pious woman who fasted, did puja and sang bhajans. One fine day she hands over a letter and the key of the house to Mayamma to be given to her husband and leaves her home in search of God. When he comes to know about it he says, 'she has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a home-coming'. Devi comes to know about her mother-in-law's qualities from Mayamma and re-presents her in the way she understands her:

"But Parvatamma had been more ambitious. She had, like a man in a self-absorbed search for a God, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder. Had she misread Baba's stories? Or had she turned them upside down and taken the contradictions, the philosophical paradoxes, to their logical conclusion?"

Devi keeps her mother-in-law's photograph in her room as she inspires her to be very independent and considers her 'a guardian angel, a mother unseen'. Baba's stories are different from grandmother's stories. While grandmother's stories 'were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into the subterranean possibilities, his define the limits'. His stories are unambiguous and reflect that women should be devoted to their husbands. He strongly believes that a woman can reach Heaven by serving her husband with devotion

and care. Baba sets the criteria for a good housewife and even after he leaves, his hypnotic voice quavers:

“The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does.”

He tells the story of Jayadeva who wrote *Gita Govinda* and explains as to how Lord Krishna comes in the disguise of Jayadeva to his wife Padmavati to continue writing the lines when Jayadeva comes out of his inspired trance. Baba feels that ‘a great man can see the spiritual greatness of his wife.’ He narrates the stories of the saintly music composers like PurandaraDasa, SyamaSastri and Thyagaraja to denote how women have been the ‘instruments of the saint’s initiation into *bhakti*.’ PurandaraDasa’s wife Sarasvati Devi gives her nose ring to a poor Brahmin to conduct his son’s Upanayanam-thread ceremony without taking his consent. When PurandaraDasacomes to know about it and sends a messenger to her to bring the ring, she finds the replica of the ring in the poisonous potion which she is about to drink. After this incident Purandara is humbled and leads a simple, austere life.

Baba’s another story of NarayanaTirtha, talks about how a virtuous wife devoted to her husband dies before him, a *sumangali*, her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermillion, her arms and neck still ornamented with bangles and gold chains. He narrates how SyamaSastri’s wife died five days before his death and how Thyagaraja’s second wife died after performing the *sumangaliprarthana*.

In his interpretations, women are instruments of men’s initiation into *bhakti*, but have no salvation of their own to seek. Devi learns the intricacies of the Hindu traditional thought and philosophy through Baba’s stories. She has now a complete vision of the entire discourse. Baba’s account complements her grandmother’s stories. She now becomes completely equipped with her own interpretations and to make her own choices in life.

Like the way her mother-in-law revolts by leaving the family in search of God, Devi elopes with Gopal, a musical celebrity to revolt against her husband Mahesh, who merely wants her to keep waiting for his arrival as a submissive housewife. His long tours and her father-in-law's departure to New York deprive her of true companionship. Her longing to bear children to break the monotony, the loneliness and the meaninglessness of life is not fulfilled. She seeks escape in the company of Gopal, remains with him for some time and finally returns to her mother, not a defeated loner but a fugitive sure of her survival, determined 'to stay and fight, to make sense of it all.. to start from the very beginning'.

In the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* thus Githa Hariharan juxtaposes the traditional mythological stories and folktales with that of the real women characters on the one hand and compares the female discourse of the grandmother with that of the male discourse of Devi's father-in-law on the other hand. Ultimately keeping these stories in mind, the heroine moves on and joins her mother. As C. Vijayasree says:

"One can locate in Hariharan's work a thread of re-visionist myth-making as a means to heal the wounds of one's soul, as a process of net-working among the women of different ages and generations, an attempt at renewing the whole community of women through re-presentation of myths."

#### **WORK CITED**

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Vintage: London. 1993.

Deshpande, Shashi. 'Afterwards', *The Stone Women and other Stories*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop. 2000. P.86.

Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. 1992.

Kirpal, Vinay. Ed. *The Post Modern Indian English Novel*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1996.