



**MYTHICAL PURSUIT FOR AN IDENTITY OF ONE'S OWN
IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S
THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT (1992)**

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ABSTRACT

The existence of Gods enhanced the dramatic quality of the myths. In fact, the first few definitions of myth linked it to the Gods; later with the advent of anthropology, the definitions changed according to the circumstance and the studies. As societies and cultures undergo several transformations, several interpretations of myths emerge. Sometimes, the hidden meanings in the mythical stories are brought out in the open through these interpretations, and sometimes, new knowledge regarding a particular society or culture is highlighted. This process of reclaiming and recreating myths happens at the cost of demythification. Such demythification takes place especially when the mythical situations and characters are placed in a modern context to highlight the contemporary human experience. Though the myths are far displaced from the contemporary times, they are found to have a cultural relevance and a social significance. The main contention of this article is that myths are given a new role to suit the needs of the contemporary times. The writers thus ensuring that they are not easily relegated to the position of a relic give them a new life.

FULL LENGTH PAPER

Human beings were curious about the how's and why's of the universe even before the advent of science and this curiosity led them to answers in the form of stories which later became mythical stories. Stories are about people and their interaction and so they had a dramatic plot. The existence of Gods enhanced the dramatic quality of the myths. In fact, the

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The main contention of this article is that myths are given a new role to suit the needs of the contemporary times. They are given a new life by the writers thus ensuring that they are not easily relegated to the position of a relic. At the same time, the myths are found to live precisely because they help each generation to understand itself better. It has been said that a real book reads us, and myths as books whether they repeat, adapt or transform the original myths, are seen to provide us greater clarity about our own situation. This article bases itself on the assumption that any creative writing, including those based on myths, is an examination and evaluation of ideas current at that time, e.g. the idea of liberty in a time of struggle for freedom, the idea of feminism or postcolonialism or globalization in the present times or the pursuit of one's own identity in the present chaos-ridden society.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is an example of a deliberate use of myth to elucidate the problems faced by women in Indian society. This novel is a good example of myths moving into the contours of feminism. The novel provides a perfect setting to delineate the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society and how far they have been successful in their revolt against it.

The narrator and protagonist is Devi, who remembers her grandmother's tales of Gods and Goddesses, which the grandmother appropriately used to compare with the family situations. Devi, in turn, is required to learn a moral from each of these stories. The narrator explains:

My grandmother's stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out. (Hariharan 27)

Several mythical characters animate the lives and actions of the major characters in the novel; the most important ones being those of Damayanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga to correspond to the circumstances faced by Devi, Sita and Uma. Devi's grandmother has a



mythical equivalent for all the significant happenings in her family, especially those concerning women.

The novel has a prelude and three parts. The prelude gives us the clue that the narrator is a female, and therefore the readers can be prepared for a story that would be exclusively from a woman's point of view. It also gives the reader an understanding that several mythical narratives may be revisited as the narrator takes the reader through her life story. Some of these mythical narratives are in the form of fables narrated by the narrator's grandmother and the narrator perceives a parallel in her life. The narrator's inquisitive mind is seen through the several questions asked by her: "[...] why she had to put up with her life [...]" (Hariharan ix) etc. However, the other three parts are divided into sections that are in accordance with the different settings.

Devi had been a victim of culture shock in New York where she had gone to pursue her Master's degree in Arts. She had an African American friend named Dan who had provided her an opportunity to meet his friends and relatives. Devi was extremely happy to note that their women voiced their rights without any fear. Racism had affected them quite badly; however, they had come out of it with an all-inclusive power to hit against the Whites so much so that when Devi shows a little gift of Krishna's idol, one among them remarked, "They couldn't bear to have a black god, so they made him blue, huh?" (Hariharan 5). Devi, at once, knew that she was at the wrong place with the wrong gift for the wrong boyfriend. This incident, however, changed her outlook on life. She could not think of being there forever. Her mother's frequent long letters forced her to be quite practical in life. And she did not want to be a part of it at all. Her Brahmin upbringing also played a significant role in making her conscious of her roots and therefore, she came back to India for good.

Devi came back to Madras, to her mother Sita and she at once loved the familiar smell of her house and her mother. However, the relationship between Devi and her mother Sita was not a very intimate one. They were, in fact, quite conscious of each other. Even when Devi tried to tell her mother about America, Sita would say, "All that is over now" (Hariharan 13). Devi's mother was intent on getting her daughter married. Devi's *swayamwara* begins and so does the author's use of mythical events to describe the incidents happening to the characters in the novel.

The myth used here to highlight the situation as told by Devi's grandma, which Devi remembers, is that of Nala and Damayanti. The readers understand the obvious intention of this myth here, that is, just as the worthy Damayanti chose her heart's desire, the worthy Nala, Devi will also be "introduced" to several 'princes' and she was to choose her heart's desire. This myth is like a prelude to Devi's experiences to undergo a *swayamwara*, to prepare Devi for it. However, Devi chose Mahesh who "is no prince, but a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste" (Hariharan 22).



As Devi remembers her grandma and her childhood days, the picture of her mother holding a veena captured her attention. Sita, her mother had been very fond of playing the veena. However, after her marriage to Devi's father, one day, her husband blamed her for not performing her wifely duties satisfactorily. This hurt her pride and she promised to never play the veena again. The myth that is being narrated to explain this situation is that of Gandhari's. Gandhari's pride was hurt when she knew that her husband was blind and therefore as an extreme step of sacrifice, she blindfolds herself. This same sacrifice could be discerned in Sita's actions as she vowed never to play the musical instrument, which she had held quite close to her heart. Devi interpreted the whole situation in a different way. She could see Gandhari's anger, "wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold" and the same anger "burnt in a heart close, very close" to hers, that is, in her mother. (Hariharan 29). She could see that her parents were afflicted by a kind of blindness: "In their blinkered world, they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of other" (Hariharan 29).

Another myth that is told by her grandmother is that of a beautiful girl who married a snake. A childless couple offered several prayers to their Gods so that they could have children. They did have an answer to their prayers, but they had a snake as their offspring. The woman nursed the snake despite the warnings of her neighbours and well-wishers. When the snake grew into an adult, the father went in search of a good girl who would marry his son. One of his hosts offered his daughter's hand in marriage. But, when he came to know that it was a snake for whom he had offered his daughter, he wanted to take back his words, but the girl declared that a girl is given only once in marriage. So she proceeded to live with her snake husband. She, however, turned her husband into a handsome human being with her touch and she burnt the snakeskin into ashes. This story was told by Devi's grandma in connection with her servant Gauri's marriage. Gauri had been married to someone in her village, but she fell in love with her young brother-in-law who was an albino. Gauri had the courage to run away from her home along with this new husband and she was considered an outcaste. However, from this story, Devi could not really identify who the real snake was—the first husband or the brother-in-law.

Nevertheless, these two myths are closely related to Devi's own life because, though she married Mahesh, she did not really want to be blind in her wifely duties to him. She wanted to be independent. When she understood that her husband was treating her like a puppet, and when 'the sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above her neck for years' (Hariharan 54), she walked out of her marriage and sought happiness and adventure in the hands of a singer by name Gopal. Therefore, we can understand that Devi had not been a mere spectator or a listener to these myths narrated by her grandmother; she had internalized all of them and arrived at her own interpretations. Her grandmother's intentions were only to make Devi aware of the different stories that made the *Mahabharata*, and teach her the moral values of



life. Slowly, all the mythical stories narrated by her grandmother moved into Devi's very soul and being. She had the urge to close her eyes, contemplate and call each one of those mythical beings in front of her to see them. This urge moved into her subconscious mind and she started having dreams wherein she is herself one of those mythical characters. She takes the form of Durga in one of her dreams. She learns the art of shooting and she masters it. Her husband is her loyal knight with a bamboo flute, Krishna. She gives birth to strong sons and daughters. When a man assaults her youngest daughter, she kills him. Thus, myths started playing a very important role in Devi's imaginations and dreams.

The myth of Amba was narrated by the grandmother to explain Devi's cousin Uma's marriage. Uma, who had an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother, was married off to a wealthy home, but her husband and her father-in-law were drunkards. When her father-in-law misbehaved with her, she decided to run away to her grandmother's house and stay with her. This story had a lot in common with Amba's story. Amba was kidnapped by Bhishma along with her two sisters and taken to Hastinapura. Amba had already been in love with Salva, and when this was revealed, Bhishma gave her the permission to go to Salva. However, Salva did not accept her because she was a 'left-over' then. Amba could do nothing but go back to Bhishma and request him to marry her. Bhishma could not marry her because of his vows of celibacy. Amba was distraught and she made up her mind to take revenge. She earned a boon to be reborn as Shikhandin and ultimately, confronted Bhishma in the Great War. The lesson that Devi's grandmother teaches Devi is that any woman can become a victim of disaster.

"But a woman like Amba, a truly courageous woman, finds the means to transform her hatred, the fate that overtakes her, into a triumph" (Hariharan 36).

Devi's father-in-law also had the habit of narrating stories from the *Mahabharata* just as her grandmother had done. However, his stories were quite different. While grandmother's stories 'were a prelude' to her womanhood, and an 'initiation into its subterranean possibilities', her father-in-law's stories 'define the limits' (Hariharan 51). His stories were for those women who had already reached their goals and a lesson to what virtues they had to follow. His stories defined a perfect woman. However, his personal life was in a mess because his wife Parvati deserted him. Parvati's story was narrated to her by the house keeper Mayamma. Apart from Devi's grandmother and mother, Mayamma was another woman, who, through her stories, changed Devi's outlook on life. Mayamma told Devi that Parvati had gone out of the house in search of her God. Devi could not exactly understand why Parvati should have left her husband. Either she did not exactly understand the stories told by her husband or she internalized them in such a way that she could no longer live with her husband. This is quite similar to what happened to Devi too which forced Devi to desert her husband. However, Devi considered Parvati to be her 'Guardian Angel' and would look into



her picture everyday to draw inspiration from her to do things according to her own conscience.

Grandmother calls upon several other mythical figures like the Gita Govinda, Yudhishtira and Ganga, relating their stories to certain incidents in the life of the characters in the story. Devi, soon, realized the strength within her. She satisfies herself by assuming the following incarnations in her dreams and fantasies:

Like Sati you must burn yourself to death, like Sati you must vindicate your husband's honour and manhood.

Like Parvati you must stand neck-deep in cold, turbulent waters, the hungry, predatory fish devouring your feet.

Like Haimavati you must turn that black skin on your sinful body into a golden sheen of light and beauty.

Like Gauri you must reap the bountiful harvest that will be yours if you embrace the lingam on the sacrificial altar.

Like Durga you shall be a beautiful, yellow-faced woman with ten arms and ride on a Himalayan lion.

[Like] Kali, you thirst for war, for heroic feats in battle. (Hariharan 94-95)

These incarnations were fulfilled only in her dreams and fantasies, however, in reality, she could not conquer anything. These ancient myths, thus, seem to have become a burden that the modern woman simply cannot bear. Therefore, she wants to create a new myth. "I will walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made" (Hariharan 95). Probably, she wants to create an all-empowering goddess who has all the above incarnations within herself.

However, finally after all her fruitful and fruitless journeys, Devi realized that she could get her peace of mind only in her mother's home. She prepares on her homecoming for a new beginning. The novel begins with her homecoming from New York and ends in the homecoming after her several experiences in life. She also realizes that she could bring a change in her mother's outlook on life as Sita is also reborn and, as C. Vijayasree puts it in her essay "Re-visionist Myth-Making: A Reading of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*", "retrieves her lost self by returning to her music" (Vijayasree 180).

Thus, in her quest for an identity of her own, Devi meets all these wonderful women in her life and through the happenings in their lives, she learns lessons in her life. The subaltern in her rises above her situation and seeks to break free from the clutches of the society. Therefore, she reincarnates herself into several forms of the Goddess and has her satisfaction in her achievements, though only in her dreams and fantasies. To achieve this, the author has cleverly fitted in several mythical stories. The colonized mind always has to fulfill its wishes by taking refuge in the myths of the past and Indian myths have more than one ways to fulfill



them. Vijayasree explains, “Devi’s final assertion of her autonomy is thus the celebration of the power of the Divine Devi and that of the entire community of women” (Vijayasree 181). Devi and Sita, both, have decided on a new sojourn of life and this time it will be done together. This assertion is brought forth in the form of resistance to move away from the oppressed condition. In an attempt to regain their lost identities, the veena is brought back to life by Sita which marks Sita’s own revival and Devi’s revival could be seen in her homecoming, into the arms of her mother, who wholeheartedly welcomes her despite the messy past. The motto that serves their life now is “Look Ahead and Never Look Back” because a troublesome past might only provide a pessimistic view of life. Freedom is something that one has to insist upon and these two women achieve their freedom. Myths help them in realizing their roles in the society. Devi followed the myths very closely, but used them to define herself. She did not want to be a Gandhari or Sita, instead, she preferred to take the roles of Durga or Kali—one who would not conform to the patriarchal rules of the society, one who would immediately fight against oppression and one who would conform to one’s own rules. Her grandmother’s narratives were very open-ended, though there was an ostensible and rigid “moral” to each of them. When Devi realized that she had to rewrite/redefine her life, she decided to return to the warmth of her home/mother. This was done even earlier when she had realized that Dan was not the right friend. Therefore, this was like the Second Homecoming. However, this time it is done with a lot of maturity and determination and leads to a strong irrevocable decision.

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