



‘DEVI’ AS A ‘FALLEN WOMAN’ IN ‘THE THOUSAND FACES OF THE NIGHT’

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ABSTRACT

The very first novel ‘The Thousand Faces of Night (1992). The novel won the 1993 Commonwealth Writers prize for the best first novel. Githa Hariharan has successfully brought out three more novels ‘The Ghosts of Vasu Master, ‘when Dreams Travel’, and ‘In times of Siege’. The four works are entirely different from one another. The style of each one is so different that one marvels at such variance. The first novel is a study of the predicament of women in India. It is also a reinterpretation of the Indian myths evoking wonder, pity and horror. The second work contains the ramblings of the mind of a retired schoolmaster and which has stories reminiscent of Panchatantra and Aesop’s fables. The third novel is a restatement of the 1001 Arabian Night’s from a feminist perspective. The latest novel shows how the intellectuals can face the ire of groups with political affiliations for any scholarly interpretation which is not to their liking. Such people who are mostly ignorant and biased can vitiate the peaceful atmosphere.

INTRODUCTION

The novel ‘The Thousand Faces of Night’ deals with the lives of three women belonging to different generations and experiencing hardships despite their attempt to lead lives of ideal women. The caretaker Mayamma’s story is not only pathetic but is also a saga of heroism. Sita, Devi’s mother belonging to another generation, and conforming to social mores has to suffer as well. Devi, the protagonist, belonging to the youngest generation, and a non-conformist also doesn’t find happiness in life.

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1P a g e



The novel 'The Thousand Faces of Night' begins with Devi in the United States of America getting ready to return to India to join her widowed mother. She had been sent to the states by her mother to acquire degrees and to be exposed to 'wholesome rays of a scientific, antiseptic sun'. The novelist doesn't throw much light on the acquisition of degrees by Devi. Her last day, just before boarding the plane, is described in the company of her friend Dan whose marriage proposal she had turned down. But as the time comes for her to leave America:

" when the plane was finally ready to take off, there was no one to turn to say goodbye... she raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet halfway, naked and vulnerable, her homecoming."

The letters she had received of late from her mother had conveyed loneliness and a longing for Devi. She recollects how her mother 'was always our anchor rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of our existence. That she might need me, my hesitant, self-doubting presence was intoxicating'.

Devi was very fond of her grandmother and on her annual visits to her village, her grandmother would make her feel very much wanted and feed her on mythological stories. Her grandmother was never tired of answering Devi's questions.

Devi's insatiable thirst for stories and her childish and yet probing questions are answered by her grandmother with the relevant stories from the Mahabharata. To one of Devi's questions, her grandmother's observation, 'because, my child, a woman meets her fate alone', gives the universal predicament as well as helps in understanding Mayamm's, Sita and Devi's lonely encounters with fate.

Devi's mind is filled with the visions of heroic and angelic figures as well as demonic ones. Further she imagines herself to be the heroine of a secret land trying to vanquish evil. "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". Her imagination runs riot and she becomes busy making journeys across land and ocean and tries to set things right.

In reality, Devi despite interest in household chores and trying to be an ideal wife finds her husband Mahesh too busy to be a companion to her. Her professional tours and other related activities keep him totally preoccupied without much time to spare for her, which disappoints Devi.

Devi's loneliness was relieved by her father in law as long as he was in India. As days pass by, and there is no change in her life, she feels bored and upset. Devi's nagging and disturbing thoughts reveal the predicament of an educated woman sacrificed at the altar of marriage.



Devi's inability to bear a child and her question "why do you want a child?" surprise Mahesh. She is made to suffer the ignominy of visiting hospitals and clinics to find out the reason for her childlessness and to take treatment. Devi's self-assessment before walking out on Gopal her neighbor is accurate. She had eloped with Gopal thinking that she can gain happiness and companionship. But unfortunately everybody looks upon her as a fallen woman, and give lecherous grins. And the truth dawns her.

The self-revelation finally pressurizes her to leave Gopal and return to her mother. Her decision to leave Gopal is timed before Gopal's departure to the states. Githa Hariharan here indicates the innate strength of the woman who is able to bounce back to normalcy in spite of all her tragedies.

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