



**EXPRESSING MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL
CHALLENGES OF INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH FICTION: A
PROBLEM OF GRAVE CONCERN AND NEED OF THE HOUR**

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ABSTRACT

Fiction has ever since been an authentic mode of literary art to expose not only the vices and follies of society but also a powerful mean to study and evaluate the human mind and its intricacies. Challenges, undoubtedly, are the part and parcel of human life, but the nature and intricacies do vary extensively depending upon an individual's social, political and economic conditions. Marginalization in society is undoubtedly one of the issues that need to be deliberated seriously. As goes without saying, to be a member of a group of society that has been marginalized for a long time, would obviously be highly disadvantageous; and when one belongs to two or three of such groups simultaneously – as in the case of a poor Dalit woman in India or a poor African-American woman in the US, things are bound to become more complicated. The fate of the marginalized lot in a society thus needs to be examined holistically for a just and healthy literary criticism. The present research article aims to critically examine and explore the typical

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strata of Indian women and the effect of physical, mental, and emotional challenges faced by them; and the very arena of examination revolves around the women characters in The Thousand Faces of Night, the first best Eurasian novel of the well known writer, activist and columnist, Githa Hraiharan.

Key Words: Challenges, emotional, manifestations, physical, mental.

INTRODUCTION

A socially and politically responsible citizen, Githa Hariharan is an audacious writer who believes that political attitude must be part of creative writing, and that a good writer is not someone who is making something perfect, but someone who believes in continuously facing challenges head-on. She thus legitimately possesses a very neat agenda of untidy, large and almost unsolvable items including the poverty, communalism, and women's issues encompassing the various economic, political, social and cultural ways in which more and newer manifestations of old obstacles are constructed to end their equality. The very acumen made her challenge the Reserve Bank of India guardianship rule way back in 1995 for being fundamentally anti-women in nature; and the apex court verdict on the subject hailed to ensure a mother's natural rights over her child. It was thus obvious for such an undaunted mind to seriously take on the issues like women's inequality in her creative works; and highlight the physical, emotional, and mental challenges of women through a careful and measured delineation of characters like Mayamma, Sita, and Devi: each one of whom had eventually been a victim of unfairness social ethos. Though they represent different economic and social strata of Indian society, Hariharan is not at all satisfied with the status and liberty allowed to anyone of them. Her serious concern for these women with disruption in their marriages can be easily traced in Mayamma, who had been a battered wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother throughout her life; Sita who had to part with her talent of music just to be a dutiful daughter-in-law; and Devi who, despite her humble submissions, got a sheer businessman in the name of a husband.

Mayamma

An epitome of everlasting struggle, Mayamma had to face the time-tested weapons of injustice, inequality and unfairness circumscribed by the typical ethos as a woman and a daughter-in-law; eventually ending to be a deserted woman. Early signs of her ability to become a mother, when she



was eventually in the village temple, didn't augur well, as her emotional joy was thwarted by the 'stinging slap' of hairy priest for "staining the purity of the temple with her gushing womanhood" (Hariharan, 115). As the story unfolds we witness her emotional, psychological and physical selves getting fractured in-toto as if she was just born to endure the undue pain and misery throughout her life.

Born and brought up in a society where perhaps "no loving parents in fact need wait...beyond the early age of eight" (116), she was "thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim"; and was forced by the social ethos to "learn about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand" (135). Married at a tender age of twelve to a useless gambler, who "grew a little more crooked everyday", she is eventually subjected to sexual assault every single night with "large heavy rough thighs heaving on her" (80), and the sheer contempt of her mother-in-law who found no "use of feeding a barren woman" (112). The peculiar challenges in Mayamma's post-marriage life seriously shake each one of us out of slumber, and compel to ponder over, what Dr Prasanna Sree Sathupati points out, "the amount of violence and rape, women in Indian society are subjected to in the name of marriage" (Sathupati, 108). To add to our dismay, we, as the story unfolds, curiously find that more than a male domination, the cruel pangs of the aristocratic mother-in-law, determine Mayamma's fate. As a matter of fact, she is bound to "welcome her penance like an old friend ... pray, make vows and dip herself at four in the morning while starving every other day ... give up salt and tamarind, meditate for hours, feed the snakes", and, last but not the least, "bath the all-conquering lingam with sandalwood, milk and her tears of ardour" (80-81). The tortuous itinerary doesn't, however, halt there; and we are yet to witness her horrifying experience while delivering the baby who eventually dies during the very process itself:

"Then the blood came...He (the village doctor) shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my blood, my dying son. She is strong, she will bear many more children, he said". (Hariharan, 122)

Eight years later, her husband "disappeared taking with him all the money in the house" (81), and, her only son forced her to part with her diamond earrings before falling ill and dying after prolonged illness. She is thus bound to "weep for her youth, her husband, and the culmination of a life's handiwork: all these ... snatched from her" (82). To add to the stigma, the mother-in-law died, "whimpering about the curse she (Mayamma) had brought upon her household", and, for "defiling the house and its family god by her years of unstinting prayers." (81) Rightly does the author point out, "women like Mayamma had indeed no choices but just to covet birth, endure life,

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nurse death”, and still had “no bitterness.” (135-136)

The life-long trauma leaves an indelible mark on Mayamma’s psyche whereby she decides to play the myth she had ever been yearning for by letting Devi and Parvatiamma snap their confounding and tradition laden ties, and march ahead. The only witness of Parvatiamma’s departure from Baba’s house in search of God, and Devi’s mute and whispering elopement from Mahesh’s house, Mayamma, by the time appears well decided in her move:

“But I didn’t stop her. I couldn’t. I heard whispering voices in the rain, one pleading, the other impatient. Then in a voice I had never heard before, soft, mellow, but as decisive as the quick leap of the precipice, she said clearly, I’m coming. Let’s go. Quickly.” 117)

The string of Mayamma’s emotional and mental challenges can well be summed up in her own conclusive expression and the impeccable message to the young eloping heroine (and the posterity at large):

“And so, my daughters...I have teased death, courted him, quarreled with him...I walk the route that leads to his darkness. ... I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry. So, with this meagre wealth that has fallen to my lot, I say, go, Devi, search for that forest you crave in your delirious youth.” (126)

All these challenges thus culminate and pave way to a new pathway where the posterity would have better and alternative mode of survival with identity of their own.

Sita

Born about fifteen years later than Mayamma into higher social and economic strata, Sita, to the great satisfaction of her in-laws, soothingly chose the feminine role of a good daughter-in-law and wife as she trampled on her music and destroyed the artist in her. A talented artist who could play so beautifully that brought “the house-hold ... to stand still” (30), Sita, a “brilliant pupil, quick, deft”, knew to work out “for at least five to six hours every day” (101). It was thus obvious for her prospective in-laws to wonder by her music talent. And by the time she “played on ashtapadi about the sweet poignancy of love, nindati chandana”, they would “forget about her dark skin”, and get “overwhelmed by her talent and their good fortune.” (102)



That she was even a better artist to adapt to the new challenges in life, is proven well as she abruptly cuts off from her hobby in order to prove herself “a wife, a daughter-in-law” (30); and, more significantly, having once chosen her role, she never had any qualms or doubts about it. She thus robustly performed her duties, planned accordingly, and achieved what she wanted. “To my mind, Sita is projected as the strongest of the three (Devi, Mayamma and Sita)”, observes rightly Indira Nityanandam, and continues that “she knew what she wanted and worked for that.” (Nityanandam, 191) The fact that a venture demands whole hearted efforts to be successful is well understood by this arduous lady. “If there was one lesson Sita had mastered in her years of study”, remarks the novelist, “it was this: you did not get results with wishy-washy half-heartedness.” (102) True to her dedication she, taking on to her newly assigned role, “sat all afternoon under a naked bulb, poring over her account books ... plotted and planned with single-minded devotion”, till years later, “her schemes bore ripe, fulfilling fruit” (102). Expert at managing things, and even more importantly, at “moulding the moist and fragile of clay into the most effective shapes” (102), it was obvious for her to first “aim at the distant goal - the economy” whereby she deftly planned to start saving out of rupees four hundred and fifty, her husband brought her every month. With this, “she saved; a cabbage here, a spoon of oil there”, and, the hoard of small change in an old tea tin grew till “it gave way to a little pile of crisp, clean notes, arranged in fives, later tens.” (102) Having “cut herself off from the clandestine line” (103), years long practice and sadhana of music, she led her husband like a “reticent accompanist eased gently... the guru behind the imitative disciple’s brilliance on stage” (103) from promotion to promotion till he was within the “exclusive circle of fast rising executives who brought home three thousand a month” (104). It was thus not a surprise to see Mr Mahadevan (her husband), a “full-fledged sahib, a Brahmin among Brahmins (pure blood and healthy bank balance)” who could soon list among his achievements “a new car, a chauffeur, three full time servants and a gardener, the best of schools for his daughter ... and a large, renovated old house.” (104) Acting prudently, Sita “thought for all three of them” (105), and deftly played her moves at the right time in the right direction; no matter if she, for the very purpose, was to “learn to eat dry chapattis” (103) for she knew well “how to make sacrifices without fanfare.” (103) Over to that she also knew how and when to “ban her mind from trading in memories, confessions, judgements, the what-could have beens” (107), and accept the reality as she did on her husband’s sudden death while on a posting in Africa. She, having burned his body and papers simultaneously, lost no time, and landed back to Madras by the next flight. In an organized manner, she, having ensured her daughter back from America, “made discreet enquiries, collected horoscopes” of the prospective bridegrooms; and “...dispatched (her) to a more permanent destination.” (107)

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Early in the story, when she observed both Devi and Mahadevan growing into the sly mutiny that threatened to “erupt through books, daydreams, gods and goddesses, secret corners, the innocent sensuality of a stranger like Annapurna” (105), she took no time to prudently “quell these phantoms of rebellion with master strokes” and “banish all the gods and goddesses to their rightful place” (ibid).

Towards the end of the story, Sita, having lived all her life according to her own rules, however, finds herself unprepared for a shock, the sudden betrayal by Devi who elopes with Gopal, and eventually realizes that “it is too late for sudden reversals, or a fresh start outside the parameters, she had constructed, or allowed to be constructed, around her” (108). She now “spent her rage, her acrid bitterness on the over-pruned plants” (108), and sent a cryptic message to Mahesh, who perhaps could never withstand Devi’s expectations: “No scandal, please” (109); legitimately expecting Devi’s return to her. True to her expectations, Devi does come back but to witness “a wild and overgrown garden” (139); the “faint sounds of a veena” (139) trying to erupt from the backdrop. Indira Nityanandam rightly observes Sita’s exquisite efficiency to steer things like a remote controller, and remarks: “one is surprised to see the deft expertise with which this puppeteer Sita holds the strings even in remote control.” (Nityanandam, 187) Just towards the culmination of plot, we still find this dashing woman as resilient as ever, “armed for an even more merciless exercise of introspection” (Hariharan, 109), sitting before the relic from her past with veena in her hands – “its faint sound inviting (Devi) into the house.” (139) “The freshly dusted Veena”, observes aptly Nityanandam, “suggests the possibility of her now attempting to attain what she denied herself all these years – to live her life for herself” (Nityanandam, 187). To conclude, we observe that, though boldest of the three, she too, despite lifelong sacrifices, is bound to face incalculable mental and psychological challenges; resolving ultimately to live her own life.

Devi

The heroine and protagonist of the novel, Devi, a middle class traditional Tamil Brahmin family girl, is just back to India after her higher education in US where she had managed to be “an uncompromising survivor” (Hariharan, 9). Once in Madras, she soon realizes, what Pradeep Trikha observes that “it was difficult to change the old order with her radical ideas, though she came from a brave new world” (Trikha, 9), and finds herself sucked in the maternal love whereby her mother “weaves a cocoon, a secure womb that ... holds (her) fast to its thick, sticky walls” (Hriharan, 13); the seashore walks often culminating into a “companionable silence” (14). Lured by her mother’s unspoken messages of loneliness she, like an obedient child, allows her to place a forbidding hand on her American experience, eventually acknowledging her as an “anchor rock ... never wrong,

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never to be questioned ... as a self-evident fact of (her) existence” (16).

A puppet in her mother’s hands, Devi is skillfully matched to Mahesh who views marriage as a milestone like other needs of life whereby she is compelled to fulfill the place of a virtuous Hindu housewife. Unable to settle down in the role, she, eventually, finds her hard earned education and exposure abroad as a hurdle rather than an asset which could not “prepare her for the vast, yawning chapters of her womanhood” (54) as she finds herself utterly defenseless against Mahesh’s indifference and superciliousness. Her desires, like learning Sanskrit or taking up a job, or at least learning to play cards, so that she can be with him, find Mahesh’s ruthless disapproval expressed only through “an inward movement of his lips” eventually “weaving a cunning cord around her vulnerable neck” (56). Victimized by Mahesh’s indifference, Devi is compelled to search for happiness in her would-be children, and eventually craves to “raise a brood of joyous, wild children, who will run pell-mell in (her) quiet garden” and “will indulge (her) fantasies of childhood, but will know better” (53). With Mahesh’s growing busy schedule and insensitive nature, however, she finds her world “whirling in smaller and smaller circles” (53) and is eventually left to seek refuge in Baba’s (Mahesh’s father’s) ordained stories. Soon she learned the hard core truth that “whatever is depended on others is misery; whatever rests on one-self is happiness” (68).

Later, when Mahesh, as a husband, failed to understand Devi on emotional grounds; and Baba departed to USA (only to return in a coffin), Devi, engulfed in hopelessness and loneliness, is forced to trace a good friend in Mayamma whereby she finds ‘loneliness’ a good teacher, almost ‘as efficient as (Mayamma’s) penance’. She listens to her life experiences, tries to draw lessons to make her life a little better, and soon learns that success of life for a woman depends on her ability to endure and go on. Failing to pierce the impenetrable walls that Mahesh builds around himself, she now decides to symbolically grow “a garden of weeds” (58) expecting what S. Indira observes that “she too might survive like the weeds against all odds” (Indira, 178).

Gradually, as the story unfolds, we find Devi responding to those heroines who chose the daring and dashing path in order to avenge the atrocities rendered by the so-called superior males. She prefers Amba to Gandhari (from her grandmother’s stories), and comments: “close to death, she (the grandmother) made me a gift of the ultimate fantasy: a woman avenger who could earn manhood through her penance” (Hariharan, 39-40). It was thus natural for Devi to discard the labels like ‘lazy and inefficient’, and felt her frustration “throb like drumbeats echoing (her) head” (71-72). Through all these atrocities Devi eventually decides to humiliate Mahesh, voicing all which was left unsaid and resolves to move on her undaunted path: “I do something bloody, final, a

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mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with” (95). She thus decides to leave Mahesh alone “without wife or child”, and embark on her “first real journey” (95) as she recalls Kritya, “a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted” (70). As rightly observed by K. Damodar Rao, Devi ultimately decide to follow the path where she would efficiently develop “a mechanism of self-defense against any onslaught from the other side” (Rao, 162). Despite the lifelong invaluable sacrifices, and, the best efforts to adapt herself into new role, Devi too, having faced numerous psychological challenges, is ultimately forced to march on a new journey; to look forward and construct a different mechanism against impending odds.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing study duly strives to bring out the physical, mental, and emotional challenges faced by the trio: Mayamma, Sita and Devi, hailing typically from different strata of Indian society covering three different generations, who are eventually forced to walk away from traditional routes earmarked by the social conventions, and, devise some different means for their survival. Penance in Mayamma’s life and loneliness in Devi’s nurture and lead them to choose their own course of action, which decide their fate, the role model they have been moulded for. Similarly, with Sita having been forced to cut herself off her years of practice and sadhana in music, the trio had to walk, what Pradeep Trikha aptly observes, “on tight rope and struggle for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves.” (Trikha, 10). After leading years of unstinting lives, they all seem to stand at some peculiar challenging front- unexpected and incomprehensible; eventually serving to be replica of many a individuals across the social strata.

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