

Journey of Women Characters in Githa Hariharan's the Thousand faces of night and Manju Kapur's Home

Dr Sarabjit Kaur

*Asst. Professor, Department of English SGGGS College (affiliated to Panjab University, Chandigarh)
India*

Abstract: *Indian English fiction has gained ground rapidly, bagging numerous accolades at home and abroad. Indian women writers now question the prominent old patriarchal domination and show signs of resistance to the same through literature. The image of women in fiction has undergone a sea change too during the last four decades-- from traditional self-sacrificing women to characters searching for identity. There are number of women characters that can be found in the contemporary Indian Fiction, who are searching for identity and a space called "home". This search can be seen in the works of the most prominent women writers, to name a few, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy and it has left indelible print in the mind of readers. This paper will study the growth of a feminist centric approach in modern Indian Fiction. This paper will study Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of the Night* and Manju Kapur's *Home*.*

Keywords: *gender inequality, identity crisis, myth, mythological characters, women characters in Indian English fiction*

I. Introduction

Contemporary Indian women writers, in their widely acclaimed texts, question the prominent old patriarchal domination and also show signs of resistance to the same. In the writings of these women authors, we hear what was never said or was said from a man's perspective. The shift from women characters as seen and projected by men to being experienced and expressed by women is a crucial one; perhaps they were not heard as they did not write. The image of women in Indian fiction has undergone a sea change during the last four decades-- from traditional self-sacrificing women characters to characters that introspect and search for identity. The growing number of writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Nayantara Sehgal, Manju Kapur and many others writing in regional languages have questioned the culture where identity and individualism has been unheard of by the female genders; on the contrary the entire focus is on the woman's role in the family: as wife, mother and daughter-in-law. In the present century, women writers have given away with traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing, submissive, tolerant women making adjustments to adopt strong female characters searching for identity or survival and who are no longer characterized in terms of their victim status. The women characters now are financially independent and assertive. So these writings become a collective consciousness that impact their presence in society and in turn make it aware of their concerns and demands. Even now, when these writers re-represent the woman in their postmodern narrative in postmodern era, the patriarchy demands acceptance and conformity, which is well depicted in Githa Hariharan's novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*(TFN).

The Thousand Faces of Night: women characters

The narrative is of sufferings, humiliation, and alienation of her women characters. The novel represents a variety of female characters, mythological as well as real undergoing agony in consequence of their desires and ambitions. These characters are fighting the idea of "an ideal woman" which is demanded of them as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. Hariharan critiques the patriarchal power structure of the Hindu society through these contemporary women. She also shows the reader the position of Indian women in the traditions and culture of this male-dominated society. She deconstructs the ideas of gender, equality and identity through the narrative. In the traditional structure of the novel, the author articulates the images of women, "good" and "bad" with the help of Indian myths, Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Sanskrit stories. Githa narrates the stories of –Devi, Sita, Parvatiamma and Mayamma though linking them to Mythological characters. The myths have been reinvented and retold for these women characters to connect to Amba, Ganga, Gandhari and others in their plight, in spite of the time gap of centuries between them. The central characters expose the various dimensions of oppression through 'Story within a story' technique.

The novel is woven around three generations of women-Devi, Sita and Mayamma. The novel brings forth the idea how despite the generation, background and the education that an Indian woman attains, her fate is to fall back into the century old customs if not more to a small extent. The Indian society, constantly, demands at

least a pretension from their women that they are obeying the centuries old routines. After Devi, the main protagonist of the novel, experiences "her home coming" she is sucked into the "this fortress that shuts out the rest of the world, ... a cocoon, a secure womb ... and holds me fast to its thick, sticky walls" (TFN 13). Devi, though from the third generation, is connected to the second through her mother Sita and to the first through her grandmother and Mayamma. She realizes that her mother is going to arrange her swayamvara as marriage is a traditional role of any woman in the traditional Indian setup. Though Devi is not interested to marry, she accepts the proposal because she does not want to hurt the feelings of her mother. At this point she also compares the relationship of her friends to their mothers, "they chatted about boyfriends, they quarreled, they kissed" to her own with her mother "we certainly did not talk about love, for each other or anyone else". When at some "deceptive moments of ...reunion" Devi spoke about her experiences of America, her mother smiled "All that is now over... why go over an old story again? Devi recollects her grandmother's story of Damayanthi that was taken from the Mahabharata. Nala, the king of Nishad was brave, handsome and virtuous. Damayanthi's father decided holding her swayamvara. Damayanthi was brave and determined to espouse Nala. So she threw the garland around his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the gods. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral, "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (TFN 20). The story of Nala- Damayanthi fascinated her. From this story Devi established the concept of Swayamvara. Her grandmother's house of her memories was always "crowded with superhuman warriors, men and women destined to lead heroic lives" and Devi "thrived on a diet of her caressing gnarled fingers and her stories of golden splendor" (TFN 27). These stories were not easy for Devi to understand or digest, they had to be "decoded.. a comparison had to be made, an illusion discovered, and a moral drawn out".

Grandmother's next story's protagonist Gandhari plays a significant part in the Mahabharata as she was married to a rich prince, who's Palace was "twice as big, twice as magnificent as her parents' palace" (TFN 28) and "the marble pillars shone like mirrors" (TFN 28), whereas on meeting her husband for the first time in such a rich palace, she was taken aback for "The White eyes the pupils glazed and useless" (TFN 29). Gandhari in anger vowed never to see again the world; so she bound her eyes with the help of a veil. Summing up the story Devi's grandmother said: "she embraced her destiny--a blind husband with a self sacrifice worthy of her royal blood" (TFN 29). Devi learnt about life through her grandmother's choice of Gandhari and acclaims: "the lesson brought me five steps close to adulthood. I saw for the first time that my parents too 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 another" (TFN 29). This story connects Gandhari, who sacrificed her sight to Sita, Devi's mother, who had put aside music to perform traditional duties of wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She breaks her veena to idealize her role in a traditional Hindu home and her breaking of the veena can be seen as a revolt against male dominance. But later in the novel, she is able to break free from the past and take control of her life, she not only resumes her love for veena but also shows courage and individuality.

Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of husband or children and felt safer in these confined relationship. This very confinement has made them slaves as they have taken shelter and dependence in them, whether it is Mayamma, Parvatimama, Laxshmiamma or other. They are the victims, the losers at the hands of patriarchal structure. Hariharan's women characters are trapped between traditions, old values, myths and modernity and have become the victims of gross gender discrimination of male dominated society. Baba, Devi's father-in-law says-

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. (TFN 71)

To keep women confirmed and suppressed, old conservative values and ideas were supported by the male world and women were forced to keep these ideologies alive. Pravitiamama, Devi's mother-in-law a woman of rare beauty, married at an early age, 'spend more and more time in the puja room' (TFN 63) doing puja and singing bhajans. But one day, left her husband's house never to return again. Baba said- "She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a homecoming" (TFN 64). Laxshimamma, widowed aunt, close to seventy, lives 'alone in a corner of the dilapidated little family house in the Agrahram' (TFN125).

Devi, the protagonist

Devi being a young educated girl with her "american experience" struggles to cope with her husband Mahesh, who is busy with his business tours most of the time. This is when Devi feels alienated in "her own" home. She searches for an identity and tries to free herself from the bondage of marriage. Her emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba. In this second part of the novel, she comes closer to Baba and he takes up the role of Devi's grandmother with stories "less spectacular" and defining the limits. As Devi explains "his stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a

woman, a wife.” (TFN,51) It seems as the author uses Baba and Devi’s grandmother as mouthpieces to initiate Devi into the tradition of an ideal archetypal woman. Devi, between all this, is looking for identity as well as dealing anxiety of not being able to find a "home", place of refuge. Through Devi, Hariharan shows how woman survives in male dominated society, facing all sorts of discrimination but surviving with her inner strength.

Women Characters in Manju Kapur's Home

Contemporary to Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur moulds her women characters to stand against the age old traditions, social as well as family restrictions, which are created on the basis of gender, and other patriarchal constraints. In a traditional joint family set up, in two of her major novels-Difficult Daughters and Home, Kapur protests against the injustice that women are subjected to in terms of social customs, beliefs and superstitions. As Githa Hariharan speaks of the question of being an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law; Kapur also questions the submissive and passive existence of women and their roles as subservient as well as obedient to the patriarchy.

The narrative is about middle class Punjabi family from Pakistan, uprooted by the partition, Kapur writes in the prologue, “The Banwari Lal family belonged to a class whose skills had been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in the market-place. Their marriages augmented, their habits conserved. From an early age children were trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. The education they received, the values they imbibed, the alliances they made had everything to do with protecting the steady stream of gold and silver that burnished their lives. Those who fell against the grain found in their homes knives that wounded, and once the damage had been done, gestures that reconciled.” (Home 1)

The narrative begins with Sona and Rupa: two sisters, one is good looking and the other merely plain. The beautiful elder Sona is married to the elder son of Banwari Lal while the younger one, Rupa’s husband is just a junior Government officer. Sona is not able to conceive even after two years of her marriage. Her mother-in-law comments her occasionally, “What can you know of a mother’s feelings? All you do is enjoying life, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you”. (Home,18) Sona performs every duty as a wife and daughter-in-law, as she was trained from an early age. Meanwhile, Yashpal’s younger brother, Pyarelal gets married to Sushila, who belongs to a well to do business family of Karol Bagh. Their marriage is appreciated by all the family because it is arranged by the parents. Sushila brings a huge dowry with her including a scooter, fridge, cooler, double bed and sofa.

After accepting her sister-in-law’s orphan son, Vicky, Sona finally gives birth to a baby girl. Everybody in the family is happy because “It is good to have a girl in the house”. (Home,35) Girl is considered as Lakshmi for the traditional family. “And now the womb has opened,” expressed Rupa, ‘a baby brother will come soon.’ (Home, 36). Sona’s delivery of her next progeny, a son is enjoyed and welcomed more than the first. Sona’s mother-in-law declared, “Now I can die in peace”. (Home,41) As both of her sons now have their sons and they can hold their head high in the society. When Sona holds her son, she feels expiated as she had done her duty towards the family by giving birth to a much awaited son. Sona feels the disgrace gone, "with appearance of little Raju, dark and plain featured like his father, but a boy, a boy." (Home 48)

Nisha, granddaughter of Lala Banwari Lal, since childhood, faces the evil of gender discrimination when like her brother, she is not allowed to ride a tricycle and go out.

‘Nisha set up a wail. ‘I want to go too’.

‘You can’t’, said her mother shortly.

‘Why ? Why can’t I ?’

‘It is better for girls to remain inside’.

‘Why ?’

‘You will get black and dirty’.

‘So what ? Raju is black. Blacker than Vicky’ (Home, 52)

In this conversation, Sona very vividly explains to her daughter about the adverse affects of being dark, she mentions, “You, you will look like the sweeper woman who comes to the house, you want to look like a Kali bhainsi ?” (Home, 52) At this tender age, Nisha gets her first lesson about the duties of a woman. Sona wants her daughter to be grounded in the tradition that would make her a wife worth living. She wants that “the art of service and domesticity should shine in her daughter so brightly that she would overcome her negative karma to be a beacon in her married home” (Home,129). She tells her daughter that a girl’s real education is in the kitchen. Sona states clearly, "what is there in happiness? A girl has to be happy everywhere” (Home, 135).

In Sheeba Azhar and Syed Ali’s words, home in the novel is, "quite fascinatingly, if not very eloquently, shows the choking closeness and destructive limitations of Indian family values. It is a closet dark world where any hint of individual expression is swiftly trampled to death, to be substituted with deadened conformity." Nisha, the main female protagonist is in search of “home”. A place she could call her own, where she could take her own decisions, do things that she wanted to in her own way, a place where she could “be”; but from the very start of the novel she is uprooted from this haven that her father and grandfather created for

her, in their own terms". Rather than being cared for, she was sexually abused in this "home" by her cousin Vicky. Being insecure and scared in her home, Nisha started having nightmares. So she was sent to Sona's childless sister, Rupa and there to some extent, she felt at "home".

Nisha experiences homelessness again when she is called back to give her grandmother company after her grandfather passes away. Slowly years roll by and Nisha falls in love with a boy during her college life. She suddenly sees herself revolting to the old traditions of the family, she gets her hair cut on the persistent demand of Suresh, a Paswan boy whom she is in love with. Sona's reaction, "Who gave you permission to cut your hair, suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things on your own, where did you find the money, the time, the beauty parlour, where did you find all these things?" (Home, 150) When Nisha declares her love for Suresh, she is forbidden to marry him as he belongs to a lower caste and is considered unsuitable for her. Nisha is restless as she thought of her future with a stranger and in the meanwhile suffers from eczema. Nisha's skin disease brings to light her internal tremors which split her personality and blemish her fair, soft and young skin. She loses dignity and respect in her own home as Pooja, her brother's wife, does not want her to touch her baby. Nisha finds herself unwanted and undesirable. She tells her aunt Rupa-"You see Masi, there is no place for me in this house" (Home, 281). Later she tells her father, "I want to leave this house. There is nothing for me here" (Home, 282). She wants to go to an ashram and devote herself to homeless widows. At least there she can live with dignity and respect. Kapur points out various pressure points in the joint family system as well as men dominated society as Nisha first had to succumb to the pressures of the elder men in the family who pass on the baton to Raju. Later, Nisha strives to establish her individuality and becomes an entrepreneur. She starts her own business of garment stitching. The work started by Nisha soon starts flourishing and gaining recognition. "She learned to be meticulous in keeping track of every expense. What did it cost to make one suit? Salaries, rent, sewing machines and their depreciation, tea, cloth, hangers, plastic covers, scooter fares, threads, laces, hooks, scissors etc etc-nothing was too small to take into account." (Home, 294) After making her presence felt in primarily a male dominated profession; she had to fall in the same trap of matrimony ascribed by the patriarchy. But she was ready for the same i.e. to shoulder responsibility not only of husband and children but beyond that. Nisha is a confident, self-reliant, bold and determined person, who defies patriarchal notions. Nisha is married to a widower, Arvind who takes her to her real home, "Now you are home," said Arvind as they climbed the stairs. Marriage becomes a displacement for Nisha from where she was at peace to a situation of resettlement. In ten months time, she accomplishes the purpose behind her marriage, she gives birth to twins. In consequence to which she loses her economic freedom as well as status in society as a decision maker.

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