

Female Masculinity in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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ABSTRACT

Two prominent female characters in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* Devi and Sita assumes characteristic traits to deal with their respective situations. Devi, overawed by her grandmother's mythological narratives and their inherent depiction of subservient female roles vis-à-vis the male. She tries to compensate her lack of feminine charm through assumption of traditional masculine traits but fails to influence her male counterparts. Sita, Devi's mother, having a submissive husband in Mahadevan, gets space for asserting herself as a matriarch in her household. She adopts all those masculine elements which felicitate her to become an authoritative mother and managerial wife. Ironically, birth the daughter and the mother have to ultimately seek succour in their femininity when they miserably fail as masculine females.

Keywords: Female, Male, Motherhood, Protest, Masculinity, Felinity, Confrontation.

Masculinity that manifests itself in a female self is what is being termed as female masculinity. It is not simply the transposition of male masculinity onto a female body. It is the visibility of traits physical and otherwise associated with masculinity in a female. Judith Kegan Gardiner has defined it in *International Encyclopaedia of Men and Masculinity* as, "female Masculinity' refers to traditionally masculine traits of character or appearance occurring in biological women" (Hariharan 203). These traits are visible predominantly in Devi and Sita, the two leading female characters of the novel. They are resilient, as they exhibit a never say die

spirit while fighting their own battles to survive in a male dominated society. Only specific points are worth considering for the purpose of the present study.

Devi lacks female charm, those typical traits, which are generally considered suitable for her sex. She proves incapable of developing a long lasting passionate love and relationship. Other than the point that male characters – she comes in contact with – are not worth invoking such feelings in her heart, her own dry lacklustre personality is one of the possible causes for her not being able to sustain any substantial relationship with men. She is nowhere shown as indulging in adopting any kind of feminine charm to captivate men. She does not believe in applying any adornment on her rather staid awkward person and physique. The narrator describes Devi's person and physique while comparing her with her mother, "Devi's thin body was different. She was angular, devoid of those essential suggestions of subtle areas only partly visible to the naked eye. Her thin, tall frame stooped a little, and was Sita shuddered to herself, almost tubercular" (105).

Devi just broods in her vacant hours, making efforts to reorient her relationship with Mahesh, never giving a material shape to them. She is overwhelmed by her grandmother's fantastic stories – replete with heroic characters both male and female – told with a purpose of molding her into an ideal female character to fit into the role of an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. But, rather than imbibing the intended lesson to fit in the idealistic mould, she gets oppressed and assumes a confrontational style of functioning particularly while dealing with men. She has visions, imagining herself becoming Amba, Kali or Kritya to wreak vengeance on the oppressive male lot. In one such vision, she associates herself with Amba, who had to assume masculinity to seek her revenge on Bhishma. Devi comments about such an obsession on her part, "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" (41). In other such vision, an elaborate one, she lives a life of gigantic proportion. She imagines herself as assuming masculine traits, becoming a strong limbed ferocious woman as a result of being accepted and trained by her benefactor, a giantess. Before accepting Devi as her protégé, the giantess comments about Devi, "You are not beautiful but your heart beat powerfully in that weak little body" (41). Devi learns to become a warrior, mastering all the skills required for it. The giantess is not trying to make a man out of Devi. She stresses the need for Devi to be wily and clever to add on to her weapons which are weak and light in comparison to those used by men warriors. The giantess says, "because your weapon is fragile, you must learn to be wily and clever" (41). So this is not male masculinity assumed by a female. It is masculinity of a woman, part of her womanhood. Devi never forgoes her claim to womanhood. She says, as a character in this vision, "When my youngest daughter pleaded with me to go down to that valley with her brothers I was overcome with the new trust of my womanhood, and I agreed" (43).

In her non-visionary life, Devi does not believe in the dictum – motherhood fulfils womanhood. She mocks the efforts made on Mahesh's part to materialise it for Devi. She also presents a satirical picture of women – on their way to motherhood – and the skilful doctors, who work towards increasing the probability of, "the easiest of accidents" (91) i.e. the phenomenon of getting pregnant. In this way, Devi resists playing the prescribed gender role for her sex. She wants to do some job to justify her education. She wants to pursue education by applying for the position of research assistant. She wants to play rummy with men. She is equally comfortable while drinking alone or in men's company. And then, she experiments a lot, not accepting what falls to the helpless lot of a hapless woman. She goes undaunted on her journey, ready to incorporate the so called masculine traits to seek her own truth and fulfilment, never yielding to the all-

encompassing efforts on Mahesh's part to tether her to her feminine roots.

Sita senses the first opportunity to assert herself when, despite being an ardent veena player, she has to break her veena's strings and decide to abandon it as a result of a severe reprimand from her father-in-law as she could not hear him while being absorbed playing it at her in-law's. Mahadevan cannot assert his masculine self to defend his wife in opposition to his father. From this moment onwards Sita keeps on gaining strength and takes perfect hold on the household in a matter of few years. Mahadevan remains happy in being side-lined. He is happy to be led in this manner. It works in his favour when, with her skills, she proves to be of great assistance in furthering the business prospects of her husband. The narrator says in this regard, "Now all distractions were laid to rest. Sita was at liberty to take her husband by the hand and lead him from promotion to promotion, till he was within the exclusive circle of fast rising executives who brought home three thousand a month" (104).

Though ambitious in willing to take things into her hands, Sita begins her marital life as willing to play second fiddle to Mahadevan. She is happy to be a mere accompanist to her husband's solo performance. But very soon, she finds fault-lines emerging in her husband's ability to perform. The narrator aptly explains Mahadevan's situation in a metaphorical way, "and his was a concert that seemed doomed to ramble, bluster about, and fizzle into a mediocre, amateurish ending" (102). Mahadevan is not shy of ceding space to Sita. He lives up to his true self. He has academic and literary ambitions, and feels presumptuous about having those skills required for such an inclination. The narrator observes about his nature, "Mahadevan was not a spineless man. He was a dreamer (He liked to think of himself to be an idealist), who would suddenly wake up to notice the unexpected detail that had escaped the more alert common sense bound people around him" (103). He is sensitive enough to notice that Sita has to eat left

over chapattis at her new home, not rice, which she relished throughout her life before marriage. He realises that Sita is a woman who knows how to make sacrifices without fanfare. Being so impressed, he readily allows her space to strengthen her position. Emboldened by this start, assisted by Mahadevan, Sita keeps on gaining greater dominance in all matters of importance. Gradually, as it becomes a pattern, Mahadevan can do very little to change it. Sita takes complete charge of Devi, her education, her upbringing. She quarrels with her husband if faced with any opposition on his part. In such a scenario, Mahadevan and Devi form a unit to protest but they have to surrender in the face of stiff opposition from Sita's side. Narrator comments, "Both Devi and Mahadevan had grown into the sly, shifty eyed accomplices of a mutiny that threatened to erupt through books, day dreams, gods and goddesses, secret corners, the innocent (and therefore more dangerous) sensuality of a stranger like Annapurna" (105).

Through the reversal of gender roles in which Sita and Mahadevan swap their positions, Sita becomes a traditional father in being strict and vigilant regarding Devi's education and upbringing. Sita enquires about everything concerning Devi, her friends at school, their backgrounds and caste. Like a characteristic father, she assumes that solemn and staid attitude towards Devi, always wary of showing emotions and care for her (Devi) in any visible manner whatsoever. She avoids caressing or even touching her daughter. Devi says, "Her love was too snobbish to caress freely. The only time I remember her touching me was when I lay half-conscious in a fever and I felt a cool dry hand lightly stroke my face" (85). On the other hand, Mahadevan finds nothing wrong in adopting the so called feminine qualities in showering love and affection on Devi. Whenever he is in confrontation with Sita, he has to yield. He would rather like to dabble in his academic and literary interests, happy to indulge Devi with his soft emotional temperament. Devi, thus observes about his personality, "And Anna, that gentle, lovable bewildered hunk of spinelessness, would look away, withdraw into his secret

life, of god knows what cunning and clandestine passions and entanglements. Even when his lips stiffened with fury, he only said, let her be, leave her alone, and held me on his lap, yet another picture book, pure fantasy, open before me" (85).

The quality of pursuing a career and working diligently to attain perfection in one's field of work can be associated with either gender but the ratio of working men versus working women is highly skewed in men's favour because majority of women are not given opportunities to foray in any other field than home. Sita, though, a housewife in the common sense of the term, she, while working in her own restricted space of action, exhibits those qualities as are generally associated with working men. She is a careerist of her own. Before marriage with Mahadevan, she perfects the art of playing Veena and thinks of pursuing it even after marriage. Devoid of any remarkable feature in her appearance, she could impress her prospective in-laws with her talent and skill in playing Veena. After marriage, she keeps on improving her skills, continuing practicing it after doing her household chores. Once, when she could not hear her father-in-law while being engrossed in her practice, she was scolded by him. She expresses her silent rage by breaking the strings of Veena and resolving never to touch it again in her life. From that day onwards she invests all her energy and efforts in becoming a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. She becomes a perfect house maker and a manager in her own right. The narrator comments in this regard, "she became an expert at managing things, and even more important, at molding the moist and fragile of clay into the most effective shapes" (102). She finds a replacement for her Veena in the form of Devi. When she (Devi) was born and was laid in Sita's arm, she refused to allow any of the nurses to touch her as, "she had found a new Veena to play on and this time she was not going to give up so easily" (104). She not only takes full charge of Devi's education and upbringing but starts taking important decisions also when she finds her husband, Mahadevan not being able to assert his masculine self and authority in any perceptible

manner. But Mahadevan does not protest. He is just happy to treat back into his cosy cocoon, to indulge in his literary pursuits. She meets no resistance from Mahadevan. Ironically to turn a matriarch, Sita has to assume masculine traits. She leads her husband also, encouraging him to attain success in his career. The narrator says, "Sita was at liberty to take her husband by the hand and lead him from promotion to promotion, till he was within the exclusive circle of fast rising executives who brought three thousand a month" (104).

Sita exemplifies the female masculinity in assuming great restraint and control in dealing with her relations particularly Devi. She never shows her emotions and feelings in front of Devi. She assumes the garb of a strict disciplinarian father while handling Devi's upbringing. She behaves like men in suppressing her emotional side. Such behaviour on her part gives her life a weakly defined direction. And doing it well provides her with a sense of purpose and achievement. Eminent scholar and writer of gender studies Todd W. Reeser has commented about such a phenomenon, "that some women want to possess Masculinity affirms its inherent value. One assumption behind this attitude is that the move from femininity to Masculinity is upward, unlike the move from Masculinity to femininity. (Often called "effeminacy" and labeled as negative and considered a move down)" (Reeser, 137). She believes that undue indulgence in emotions and feelings might spoil her daughter. She avoids even an innocuous touch or caress to express herself in her relation with Devi. Devi comments about her mother, "Her love was too snobbish to caress freely. The only time I remember her touching me was when I lay half-conscious in a fever and I felt a cool, dry hand lightly stroke my face" (85).

She applies the same sense of control and restraint in her relation with her husband. She is unable to develop any perceptible feelings of love and attachment in Mahadevan's heart. In her enthusiasm to lead her husband to scale greater heights in

his career, she sends him off to South Africa. A confrontational situation develops between Sita on the one hand and Mahadevan and Devi on the other. Sita has her way in deciding the fate for both of them. Concerning this, the narrator says, "Sita could, and did, rule with an iron hand. She thought for all three of them: and when she could do so without offending propriety, she acted for them, swiftly, decisively and above all, unobtrusively" (105). In her enthusiasm to lead her husband to scale greater heights in his career she sends him off to south Africa, where he dies a painful death, bereft of any love, care and assistance on her part.

This whole enterprise on Sita's part to take things in her control, assuming masculine characteristics to have her way in dealing with all matters of concern, fails utterly in the end when Devi cannot be what Sita wants her to be. In the face of such a failure, she has to resort in the end to her true feminine self, taking up Veena – a symbol of feminine grace and accomplishment. She accepts her defeat humbly in foraying into the masculine territory too far. She has no other option then to accept her daughter back and start a new life with her.

WORKS CITED

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POEMS

1

Oh... Samaritans !!!

ANUPAMA SURESH

Beauty of sounds
resonates far and wide
in the wild imagination
of love.....
hope triumphs
even when truth is said to prevail
nothing then seems right though...
where...
where do we go
Oh...Samaritans!!!!

the resonance of sound will soon be lost
in the ripples of despair
do not hold your truth so tight
let the clouds of hope shadow them
till.....
till we can hear
the beauty of sounds
resonating again...
Oh...Samaritans!!!

