

Gender and Sexuality in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract: Postcolonial literature calls into question the kinds of identities demanded, recognized and imposed by families. Postcolonial women writers see woman as being colonized by their own men. Patriarchal society attributes particular values to the woman's body and the woman assimilates these values. Feminists have objected to several kinds of objectification of the woman's body as self sacrificing mothers or faithful wives. The lived experience of the Asian woman involves a deep engagement with spirituality and religious beliefs. The Asian woman battles against patriarchy using religion and spirituality. Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* shows how Gender and sexuality have influenced the lives of women. Indian culture and mythology too have shaped the lives of Indian women. The concept of Swayamwara is explained to Devi through the mythical stories of her grandmother. All her grandmother's stories were a kind of preparation to her future married life. The three women in the story, Mayamma, Sita and Devi are victims of the patriarchal system. They struggled for a means of survival to fashion their lives. Women must make their own choice. They need not be restricted by the roles imposed on them by patriarchy. A woman's choice should lead to her transformation into an empowered woman. She would then learn to defy gender and sexual oppressions. The spiritual power in her would lead to her self empowerment. She has to liberate herself from the age old notions of womanhood cherished by the patriarchal society. The redeemed woman is thus reborn into a new woman.

Keywords: Gender, myth, sex, swayamwara, patriarchy, quest, myth, empowered woman.

Within the gender- sexuality paradigm of postcolonialism, postcolonial women's literature calls into question, the kinds of identities demanded, recognized and imposed by families. Their concern over the assumption of heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the norm within families and society is often thematised as the quest for alternative forms of relationships. Associative links between ethnicity and sexuality have been explored by South Asian and South East Asian diasporic writers of the postcolonial period. Postcolonial women writers see woman as being colonized by their own men. Patriarchal society attributes particular values to the woman's body and the woman assimilates these values. Feminists have objected to several kinds of objectification of the woman's body as self-sacrificing mothers or faithful wives. Postcolonial feminisms have evolved out of specific contexts in Asia, Africa and the diasporic cultures of Black Britain or Asian American communities. This lived

experience of the Asian woman involves a deep engagement with spirituality and religious beliefs. The Asian or African woman, who battles against patriarchy often use religion and spirituality. The spiritual, in other words, can be a means of self empowerment. Alice Walker in her *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* therefore gives primacy of place to the spirit: "[A womanist] loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle....Loves herself. Regardless."(xii) In India, the family remains the cornerstone of the cultural arch. Women have to sacrifice their happiness and even their health to serve the greater cause of the family. Gender differences are therefore constructed in contexts of the family and society. The woman is made to believe right from girlhood that male is complete and she is not. Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one."(273) This view proposes that in gender studies, the term "gender" should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and feminities. Gender denotes women and men depending on social factors (social role, position behavior or identity. Gynocriticism has sought to uncover particular modes of women's writing by positing the woman's experience as being at the center of both writing and criticism. Within the arrival of poststructuralism on the critical scene, philosophers and critics such as Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Lucy Irigaray developed a notion of 'women's writing.' Focusing on the language of women's writing they postulated a fluid, non-linear, elliptical, part-mythic, mystic writing which is part autobiographical and part fictional.

My paper attempts to show how Gender and Sexuality have influenced the lives of women in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Indian culture and mythology too have been instrumental in shaping the lives of Indian women. Githa Hariharan delves deep into the traditional concept of marriage through the mythical stories of Damayanti, Gandhari, and Amba told to her by her grandmother. These mythical stories portray women as ideal women who sacrificed their lives for others. Githa Hariharan's tale is a mythical, ritualistic and folkloric representations of gender and sexuality in scriptures and epics. Every artist must serve the aspirations of his community and tribe. The use of myth and folklore -which are collective, shared, communitarian and not individual-is thus essential to the artist. Mythic spaces serve the postcolonial purpose of economic self determination, cultural identity and political freedoms. Mythical spaces retrieves a pre-colonial past. This precolonial past might be a myth. Myth is language --to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. Jeanne Rosier Smith in *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* says myths, as they appear in literature, can be read as part of an effort for human and cultural survival."(3) The postcolonial novel was a space and form where such myths could be forged. Roland Barthes (1957) in "Mythologies" says:

What is a myth, today?.....myth is a type of speech. Myth is a system of communication, that is a message. It is a more of

signification, a form. Since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse ...Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history.(1119)

Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* articulates the problems of women with the help of Indian Mythology. She links the plight of her characters with the characters in Indian myths as Mahabharata, Sanskrit stories etc. These stories were instrumental in supporting the insidious patriarchal concepts. The lives of the three women --Devi, Sita and Mayamma exposes the different dimensions of women's oppression. The reworking, revisioning and retelling of the myths as allusions of the character's story is the highlight of the story. For any Indian women, the institution of marriage ensures protection, love, compatibility and happiness. But it also lays a lot of restrictions and constraints which forbid them a life of freedom. Devi, a young educated girl returns from the U.S after her studies. Her mother is in search of an ideal groom for her. Her grandmother had narrated to her many stories to her during childhood and these stories are a kind of preparation to her future married life. Her grandmother's stories are allusions to Gods, Goddesses, superhuman warriors, brave prince, beautiful and virtuous princesses, men and women destined to lead heroic lives. The concept of Swayamwara is thus laid out to her through the stories of her grandmother. "Through the long, still summers of my childhood, my grandmother laid out for me the feast of a bride's choice, the regal dignity and solemnity of a Swayamwara".(18) The story of Damayanti, a beautiful princess who selected her husband Nala, the King of Nishadas is narrated to her by her grandmother. Devi was told that she too would enjoy the splendors of marriage enjoyed by the heroines in the stories of her grandmother. Patriarchy sees marriage as the only alternative possible for women. Hence they are allured to the institution of marriage by the mythical stories told to them by their elders. "Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, a happy ending."(20) Devi's grandmother believed that her granddaughter would live like a princess. Her grandmother's stories had made her decide what sort of a person she should be married to..Devi follows the patriarchal belief that the woman's fundamental status is to be a man's wife, the mother of his children. Thus she becomes wife to Mahesh. Another story told by her grandmother is the story of Gandhari who embraced her destiny—a blind husband—with a self sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. The story of Gandhari brought her closer to adulthood. She learned the lesson of sacrifice from the story of Gandhari. But the story of Gandhari reminded her of her mother who had to sacrifice her passion of playing the veena after her marriage.. "We never saw her touch the veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised, and our household never heard that heart-rending music again."(30)

According to Elsa Gidlow (1981)

A little girl, on the other hand, from her earliest years and throughout each phase of her education and development, receives both active and and subliminal messages of her subsidiary role, of her incompleteness as a person, hence her need to realize and complete herself through others: children, a husband. (15)

For Simone de Beauvoir, marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement which reinforces sexual inequality and binds women to domesticity. It perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she is happy. She is thought to be content that her needs are provided for. De Beauvoir, however refuted this belief. Introducing the concepts of 'transcendence' and 'immanence' she argued that the fulfilment of human potential must be judged not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty. The story of the young girl marrying a snake also moralises the theme that a devoted and loving wife would soon be rewarded with a happy married life. The young wife looked after her snake husband and one day he turned into a sweet smelling young man. But the stories she heard from her grandmother was not precisely the same as the "sordid stories she saw unfolding around" (31) her. For instance the maid servant Gauri who was married off came after a few years, having left her husband. She could find no love in her husband and had to run away with her brother-in-law. The story of Uma, Devi's cousin is also very different from the stories told by her grandmother. After having lived in her husband's house for a few years, she left for home after having being assaulted by her drunkard father-in-law. The grandmother had an excuse for the brief marriage of Uma: "A high born prince, or even a goddesses has been the victim of disaster." (37) The sad story of Uma is not a matter of distress for the old woman. The old woman brings in another tale to teach Devi that a truly courageous woman can transform her illfate into a triumph. Hence the story of Amba, Ambalika, and Ambika is narrated to Devi. Amba is a woman who is in revolt against the injustice done to her by Bheeshma. She was a princess who was to marry the king of Salwa. On the day of her Swayamwara she was kidnapped by Bheeshma who carried her and her sisters to his palace. On reaching the palace she declares the secret of her love for the king of Salwa. She returned back to her lover, but he refused to marry her. She came back to the palace of Bheeshma and implored him to marry her. Bheeshma rejected her offer of marriage and she decides to take revenge on him. These stories reveals the fact that a woman's whole existence depends upon her marriage. Had Amba been wife to the King of Salwa, she would have been leading a happy life in his palace. But destiny proved otherwise. She died in the forest with her heart full of vengeance for Bheesma. According to Ruth Sheila (1990) in *Issues in Feminism* -

It is most telling, I think, that the favourite female fairy tales end with the wedding, and all else is subsumed under the heading of "ever-after". It is as though these stories teach us that our whole existence is to be wrapped up in the quest for a mate; that once we acquire the

mate , all else is decided; that after the wedding, definition of what follows is irrelevant because it is indistinguishable from any other ever-after; that what follows really has little importance because we have already the all important, that life with the prince in his castle is the only happily-ever-after that is possible for us, there being no viable alternatives; that all the other aspects of our lives , public as well as private, are determined in large measure by the overwhelming pervasiveness of the wifely estate. (208-209)

Devi after her marriage to Mahesh settles as an ideal, dutiful wife in his father's house. She busies herself with domestic duties with the help of her servant Mayamma. She spends more time with her father-in-law Baba who like her grandmother tell her stories from the lives of mystic saints and music composers. "His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear.... They always have for their centre -point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife" (51). Devi's talks with Baba, her father-in-law reflects how a woman should serve her husband. He explains the means of reaching heaven by serving her husband with devotion and care .But as days pass by , she becomes pale and lifeless in her husband's house. But Baba's presence is a solace to her as he showered on her "sweet wisdom , his rare but brilliant smiles ." (58) The story of Purandara Dasa gives the message that "it takes the wife's flame of dharma to light within a man , the divine lamp that is rusting with neglect." (66) It was Purandara Dasa's wife's dharma that lit the divine lamp within her husband Dasa. He was humbled and gave away his property. The story of Narayana Tirtha also emphasizes the idea that it is a woman's selfless devotion that initiated Narayana into Sannyassa. "Great men earn through their spiritual power , the fortune of a virtuous wife " (67) and A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies a Sumangali". (66) These illustrative stories and sayings revealed that a woman ought to be virtuous in her life. Domestic confinement and work has made life miserable for Devi .Her loneliness had aggravated her dislike for her husband who had little time to be with her . She was very often reminded of the duties of a housewife as told to her by her father-in-law. "The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work , and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind , word , and body, she who does not transgress her lord , attains heaven even as her lord does" (70-71). But neither the stories of her grandmother and Baba nor the real stories of Sita, Uma, Gauri, and Mayamma make her a submissive wife to Mahesh . Like her mother-in-law who left home in search of a God, she too revolted against her husband by leaving him. She eloped with Gopal and this is a revolt against her husband Mahesh who deprived her companionship. Her longing to bear children to break the loneliness of life is also not fulfilled . According to Elsa Gidlow, (1981)

The woman in her revolt realize that she is not an auxiliary , not a partial being needed to be completed by alliance with a male-not a womb, a pair of breasts, legs, a cunt-but that she emerged into life as a whole human person who was robbed of the recognition of her wholeness to one degree or another. (415)

According to Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in *Key Concepts In Cultural Theory* have brought out the difference of 'gender' and 'sex' in the following words:

The concept of gender is typically placed in opposition to the concept of sex. While our sex (female/ male) is a matter of biology, our gender (feminine/ masculine) is a matter of culture. Gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behavior and action as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Crucially biology need not be assumed to determine gender. This is to suggest that while what makes a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, the precise ways in which women express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture. (158)

Sexuality is an important issue in our life space. It is indicative of the role we play in a patriarchal society, that the aspect of our nature that is considered definitive of us by the male hegemony is also the aspect of ourselves from which we are commanded to be the most alienated. The main function of women in patriarchy is the role as mother (procreator or nurturer) apart from being a sexual playmate. In patriarchy, women in their sexual roles are ideally to function not as self-affirming, self-fulfilling human beings, but rather as beautiful dolls to be looked at. Women's sexual role in patriarchy is to be acted upon, not to act ourselves, except in so far as this serves the user's interest or needs. The reproductive systems of men and women are biological, but they are invested with particular meanings through a social process. Women are capable of bearing children. Hence motherhood becomes a symbol of the true female and nurturing a child is the woman's natural job. It also becomes the central role for women to perform as no woman is complete unless she bears children. Feminists argue that these are social values attributed to biological acts. Judith Butler, following Derrida seeks to deconstruct all fixed identities. All our identities come from differentiations, from other identities. Paradoxically identities are based on performances. It is in this sense heterosexuality, which takes itself as the only authentic form of sexuality, is a string of performances.

The mythical story of King Shantanu and Ganga told to Devi by her grandmother taught her what it is to be a good mother. But Devi experiences a different situation in life. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) had argued that women could be truly free only if she and her body were freed of reproduction. Devi revolts against Mahesh by refusing his craving desire for a child. "Why do you want a baby" (87). She elopes with Gopal but finds life with Gopal miserable. She decides to leave him for her mother's house. Her life long search for an identity ends when she reaches her mother's home. She understands that the source of spiritual autonomy is in herself. She discovers the regenerative and recreative powers of her sexuality. She has within herself all that is necessary for strength, creativity, autonomy and spiritual relatedness. The key to female emancipation lay in woman's release from her bodily identification. Devi tries to free herself from all bondages in order to find her identity. She takes the examples of women who had revolted and rebelled against the social pattern of the

patriarchal society. The mythical stories of Amba and Ganga are examples of women defying the normal order—pursuing the life of a male and denying to nurture children. Men and women are both transcendental and immanent. We can overcome our basic drives and pursue our emancipation from bodily identification. Devi's mother Sita is also a woman who abided by the principles laid out by patriarchy. She was “a woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifices without fanfare.” (103) Mayamma is another woman who had to suffer the worst due to an illbred son. Both these women had lived up to the expectations of the patriarchal order. First hand knowledge of these women's experiences and the stories told to her by her grandmother and Baba did not stand in her way to achieve emancipation from the patriarchal male. Mayamma and Sita and Devi had been victims to the ideologies of the patriarchal system. The three of them struggled for some balance, for a means of survival to fashion their lives. Mayamma had no choice in life. She had struggled all throughout her life. Sita born fifteen years after Mayamma was different. She had great talent which set her apart from the other girls. But after her marriage she had to pay the price for it. Her life was devoted to the well being of her family. “She had anchored her firmly to the worldly indices she had adopted in place of the veena.” (136) But her survival, a generation away from Mayamma's had been far more efficient, but the pain is deep. Devi had been well looked after, learned and imitated the lessons taught to her. Devi had run away from all her trials but now she understands that it is time to act. Women must take charge of their own choice. Instead of being the negative, inferior other, they must become subjects in their own right. They need not be restricted by the roles and identities imposed on them by patriarchy. Thus women's choice will lead to her transformation into an empowered woman. Devi is symbolic of the archetypal heroine. She is an archetype of transformation and redemption. She undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals in passing from adulthood, that is, in achieving maturity and becoming a full-fledged member of his or her social group. The initiation here consists of three different phases—her separation from Mahesh and Gopal, her transformation into a sexually emancipated woman and her return to her mother's house as a self-empowered woman. Like her quest for selfhood or her attempts to free herself from patriarchal bondage, this is death and rebirth experience for her. Devi is reborn into a new woman. Franz Boas (1895) says, “It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.” (18) Devi decides to build a new world for her where Mahesh and Gopal have no place. She leaves for her mother's home. Devi also destroys the mythical world created by her grandmother. Instead she creates a world very much different from the world she saw and heard around her. She decides to be different from her mother Sita and Mayamma who were loyal to their men and had one single goal, wifehood. The heroine seems to have embarked on a quest myth. She is in search of an ideal world of fulfilled desires, the free human society. She

finds this ideal world in her mother's house where she hears the sweet music of the veena. All alone, her mother has found time to play her veena. Devi will have to fight her way to find some meaning in her life "To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning." (139)

Claude Levi Strauss says, "the purpose of mythology is to provide an outlet for repressed feelings." (102) Geetha Hariharan opens up an outlet for women to prove that traditions and cultures are creations of patriarchy and that through mythological stories women are trained to be ideal wives and mothers. But Devi, her heroine sees life differently. She learns to defy gender and sexual oppressions. She believes in her spiritual power which would ultimately lead to her self empowerment. She liberates herself from the age-old notions of womanhood cherished by the patriarchal society. She is thus an empowered woman when at last she reaches her mother's house. Chris Weedon (1988) opens her Book, *Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory* with a provocative statement: Feminism is a politics...Feminist literary criticism has given us an opportunity to look at women in literature from women's point of view. we may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all they have to tell.

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