
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:11 November 2013
ISSN 1930-2940

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Myth as Male Conspiracy: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



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Abstract

In this paper, an endeavour has been made to study the very basics of the creative dynamics of Indian women fiction through a close study of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The position of Indian feminism on the role of myth in woman's life/fiction would be discussed primarily. Does this fiction validate myth without any challenge? Or does it resist its authority? Is myth a sacred construct? Or is it a conspiracy of the so-called phallogocentric social set up? Is myth indispensable? Or can it be done away with? I shall try to answer these pertinent questions to bring out the response of Indian women writing towards the mythical and the archetypal.

Keywords: Myth, Feminine, Patriarchal, Post-modern

Mindset Behind Indian Women Fiction

It is pre-supposed that there is a definite mindset that goes into the very formation of the burgeoning corpus of Indian women fiction. An attempt to discover the broad possible contours of this mindset with all the attendant risks of reductivism is undertaken to arrive at the very poetics of this mindset. "An integral part of the feminist critical project in the West has been to re-evaluate the ideological underpinnings of dominant genres be they high or low, realist or fantasy."¹

On Defining Myth

To begin with, it is necessary to understand what a myth is all about. In common parlance myth signifies "any story or plot, whether true or invented."² To some myths is an authentic source of history, fossilized history. Michael Grant goes a step further when he terms myth as "para-history", which records not what happened but what people at different times, said or believed had happened."³ Myth, as Northrop Frye would constantly remind us is the very grammar of our language. It provides a structure to our imagination. Myths are not easy to disown. Jungian psychology would tell us that they are ingrained in our consciousness irrevocably. Myths bequeath us the very co-ordinates of our behaviour. Myths are heralded as universal fables that have a paradigmatic value in all environs. In post-modern terms, myth as grand-narrative is not accepted as a

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harmless, apolitical, value-free story or a fable. Myth is taken as a closed, value-loaded narrative which tends to erase the minor differentiations of race, nationality and gender in favour of the dominant and the powerful. Myth is the mischief of the mighty. Post-modernists warn us against this granted linearity of the mythical.

***The Thousand Faces of Night* – Full of Women Characters**

Githa's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* records the evolution of an Indian woman named Devi against the conservative native *mythos* which deters and even chokes her growth at every possible juncture of her life. The novel is not built around the easy dialectics of the mythical versus the existential. There is an unmistakable axis of gender that overtly intervenes into the narrative making it a complex womanist discourse. The novel is peopled with women characters. In real terms, what we get in this novel is a virtual maleless world. Male characters are relegated to the margins. This, however, does not mean that patriarchal order is absent or secondary to the overall design of the novel. The myths that Grandmother and Mayamma recount and express themselves through are grim reminders of ever-present tyrannical male order. Male characters, even when they are pushed to the edges, stalk all over the narrative through myths. In women writing, myths are allegories of the male.

The Concept of *Indian Woman*

Before Devi's encounter against these totalizing allegories of the male, i.e., myths, is discussed and analyzed, it is pertinent to problematize the very concept of 'Indian Woman' first. After all, Indian woman is not a uniformly definable being. In the context of the novel Grandmother with all her patriarchal values is more Indian than the US-returned protagonist Devi is. In fact, Devi's stay in America and her relations with Dan take the credit of her being a native Indian woman away from her. In America, she learns two things: (1) "...in America you could brazenly plead your rights as an individual" (p. 6)⁴. (2) "The possibility of imposing permanence such as marriage – however, flexible in transient America – was somehow obscene" (p. 6). This clearly brings out that Devi is a sufficiently displaced being, and her backlash against the

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mythical cannot be termed as the backlash of an Indian woman as such. The grandmother as an illiterate wizened old woman also cannot be accepted as a befitting model of post-colonial Indian woman. Mayamma is all the more superstitious.

Who, then, is the Indian woman in the novel?

Who, then, is the Indian woman in the novel? Devi, despite her brief stint in US as a post-graduate student, could be taken as a representative of new Indian woman for they too are sufficiently westernized. Contemporary Indian women do not live in an insular present; nor can they wish away the colonial past. The very fact they are the products of a post-colonial society dis-credits any claim of their being absolutely native or aboriginal. In this limited sense, we can say that Hariharan's novel traces the trajectory of new Indian woman's evolution against the backdrop of patriarchal society that legitimizes its authority through the perpetuation of grand myths.

Tryst with Myths

Devi's tryst with the subtle regime of myths begins when she as an innocent child is pitted against the wizened grandmother, the eternal story-teller of native Indian ethos. Her innocuous curiosities are satisfied through big fables. At this sapient stage, myths fascinate the girl-child Devi as she is easily lured into their make-believe world by the crafty grandmother. The story of Damayanti choosing her bride in a swayamvara comes to her as a real heady stuff: "...and I listened, rapt, my seven-year-old mind thrilling at the splendours that awaited me" (p. 20). The very prospect that some day kings and princes "dressed in robes and jewels of such brilliance, the eyes did not know where to look" (p. 18) would be making a beeline for her in a swayamvara overwhelms Devi. Damayanti becomes her arch model; she asks her grandmother, "Will I be fair like Damayanti when I grow up?" (p. 19).

Radical Response

Teenaged Devi responds to myths in a radically different way. She is no longer complacent about them. When she comes across an old photograph of her mother Amma

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playing a veena, she is “surprised” (p. 27) for she has not known her mother to be a veena-player. Grandmother bangs a story into Devi’s volatile mind to discount her surprise. Gandhari is grandmother’s prototype of “real woman” (p. 28). Gandhari’s heroic tale of “self-sacrifice” (p. 29) becomes a handy instrument to checkmate rebellious vagaries of a young girl. When grandmother narrates her story, Devi intervenes, but her interventions are dismissed by the seasoned grandmother. For instance, when Devi asks, “If he [Dhritrashtra] was so noble, why did he agree to marry her?” grandmother replies, “All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and deaf ones” (p. 29). Further she continues, “Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman. She embraced her destiny – blind husband – with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (p. 29).

Intimidation

Intimidation through myths continues unabated. The story of “the beautiful girl who married a snake” (p. 33) and the Mahabharata episode of Amba-Bheeshma duel are rammed into Devi’s consciousness with a patriarchal gusto. Grandmothers, unknowingly, happen to be the unpaid committed cadre of the patriarchal apparatus called society. Grandmothers outdo grandfathers when it comes to preserving the patriarchy. Devi’s observations on Baba’s [Devi’s father-in-law] stories in this regard are quite remarkable:

Baba’s stories remind me of my grandmother’s, but they are also different. They are less spectacular, they ramble less. Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits... His stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional (p. 51).

Rivalry with the Fantastic

A fierce rivalry with the fantastic sets in, right from adulthood in Devi’s mind. As she grows, the pressure of the mythical mounts on her. She harbours a secret desire of responding “to my [her] grandmother’s years of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment with a story of my [her] own” (p. 40). She begins to look at the myth-dictated society with a belligerence and defiance of a warrior: “I lived a secret life of my own: I became a

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woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons, heads” (p. 41).

Adult Encounter with the Mythical

Grandmother’s death gives now a sixteen years old Devi a respite. After that she joins a college hostel and later goes to America. This intermediate period in her life gives her a freedom to be. But after her studies and sudden demise of her father, she comes back to India only to re-discover her old rivalry with the mythical. But now her protest undergoes a qualitative shift. As a child, she never realized the real stranglehold of myth in day-to-day life. She could, at times, afford a casual, half-serious, care-free, kiddish attitude. As an adult, married young lady, she finds that myth is not mere a wonderful story, it is a veritable aspect of life. Not only does myth dictate life and its realities, it overtakes them too. A point comes when the mythical becomes the real and vice-versa.

Blurring of the Mythical and the Real

The character of Mayamma, the old family retainer in the house Devi has married into, epitomizes this blurring of the mythical and the real. She fills the slot of archaic grandmother in Devi’s post-marital life. She is both a victim and a perpetuator of myths. Her rituals appear more tyrannical than the stories of the grandmother: She invoked every day the goddess’ thousand names; five hundred times she prostrated herself at the feet of the ever-fertile mother. Every six months she invited six Brahmins to a feast and sent them away with richest gifts she could lay her hands on (p. 81). Mayamma’s rituals rock Devi’s liberal imagination. “The dark room of Mayamma’s gods” (p. 83) becomes the brooding space of married Devi.

“Barrenness”

When as a married women Devi fails to conceive a child, Mayamma perpetuates superstitions which she had observed throughout life first as an unlucky wife and then an unlucky mother. To the frustrated Devi, she advises:

Pray, pray, Devi. Tell the beads till your fingers are calloused and numb with exhaustion. Sit between five fires in a grove of penance for the sake of your unborn son. Find Shashti’s head, a smooth

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stone the size of a man's head that rests under a sanctified banyan tree.... (p. 94).

Phallogentric Mythos and the Androgenic Realities

In the end one gets an impression that Githa Hariharan's narrative drives its basics structure from this on-going contest between the phallogentric mythos and the androgenic realities of a woman named Devi. "*The Thousand Faces of the Night*" emerges as a metaphor of a hydra-headed mythos that unleashes a dark terror on the female. The female is an eternal captive in the closed frame of myth. Myth has thousand faces. It gives a language to Devi's dreams, it punctures them too. Remember in moments of intense agony Devi fashions herself in the image of a Kali or a Durga. Myth is protested through the myth itself. Devi confides in myths, she distrusts them too. She is lost in the mighty maze of the mythical. This accounts for the complex poetics of Hariharan's novel.

Githa's Poetics

The myth is not subverted with a playful postmodern impulse. Here C. Vijayasree's observations on Hariharan's poetics are significant: "Subversion, parody and pastiche seem to be preferred techniques in feminist re-writing of the old texts. But in Hariharan's work, the old stories undergo subtle and gradual transmutations through narration as they are passed from one generation to the other."⁵ The novelist does not indulge in inventing an easy alternative world of fantasy to counter the terror of the myth. This saves the novel from slipping into the zone of the bizarre and the fanciful. Devi's resistance to mythos is not radical or vehemently disruptive. This lifts novel to a level of serious feminist discourse where propaganda is shunned in favour of an honest and realistic portrayal of life. After all survival is a pre-condition to any futuristic struggle. Devi resists the hegemony of the patriarchal, but she never endangers her survival by adopting fundamentalist feminist position. In Indian women fiction, this constitutes the basic design of protest.

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