

PENANCE IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

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ABSTRACT

India stands for its civilization with great tradition and rich heritage. It produced great epics of the world i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata where we find myths and tradition of our nation. The novel 'The Thousand Faces of Night' deals with penance in its myriad forms, in its familiar and not-so-familiar ways in the context of the exploration of the Indian woman situation in physical and psychological terms. Penance in the novel as it springs from and results in a multiple response ranging from self-inflicted suffering to protest, revenge and violence.

Githa Hariharan illustrates a character in the Mahabharata who could be regarded as the very incarnation of penance is Amba Who was unfortunately married to Bhishma and wanted to take revenge on him by doing penance. Similarly Mayamma did penance to change the course of the horoscope. Ten years of penance she was blessed with a son on an auspicious day but her hopes were short-lived.

Hearing the stories of Amba, Mayamma, Sita, and other women characters, Devi accepts penance as an inevitable part of woman's life: "That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance"(67).

KEY WORDS: Penance, Revenge, Psychological, Inevitable

INTRODUCTION

The English language which we inherited from the colonization of British has been used as a vehicle of conveying our genre of life to the westerners. This genre is known as Indian Writing in English that has great writers like Radhakrishnan, Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan. These stalwarts used Indian English Fiction as a powerful tool to create awareness among people and also to universalize our ethnic culture.

Recent years have witnessed a good number of Indian English fiction writers who have stunned the literary world with their works. Their works enriched the world literature, and they have been awarded with accolades and prizes in the field of literature. There are two kinds of writers who contributed to the genre of novel: the first group of writers focused on the various social problems of India like poverty, class discrimination, social dogmas, rigid religious norms, etc. that has an appeal to the west. The second group of writers includes those who are global Indians, who are Indian by birth but they have lived abroad, so they see Indian realities objectively.

The term 'myth', used in English is derived from the Greek word 'muthos' which means 'word' or 'speech'. It is a system of "Hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do to provide a rationale for social customs and observances". (Abrams 170)

In the Indian traditional family system, myths have a unique importance as they are verbally and orally transmitted from one generation to another generation in order to “establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 170).

Githa Hariharan is one of the Indian English Women writers who have been producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. She belongs to the second generation of postcolonial women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju kapur, Anita Nair and Shoba De who together created the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. These women writers have presented life through literature with great vividness.

Githa Hariharan’s novel *The Thousand faces of Night* is not just a women’s novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned and retold from a female point of view and also deals with the elements of life, about love and death, about women and men, passion and loneliness and clashes of cottons and of continents. This paper analyses how Githa Hariharan the Indo-Anglican fiction writer brings out the miserable lives of the Indian women through three women characters – Amba, Sita and Gandhari. Penance becomes a part of Indian women who always stand for self-sacrifice. In the story, Indian myths are intermingled with the lives of the Indian women.

Penance, an Inevitable Part of Woman’s Life

In a dominant, patriarchal society like India, it is common to see women, pitted against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against themselves resulting in self-inflicted wounds and penance. This results in the realization of the impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliations on them. This hostility against oneself is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the Mahabharata. As the story goes, Gandhari was given in marriage to the prince of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra. Initially she was much impressed by the refinement of culture and riches of the people of Hastinapur on her arrival with her bridal encourage. It was only much later that she realized that she was married to a blind man. In her pride, in her anger, without uttering a word, she tore off a piece of her cloth and tied it tightly over her eyes.

Githa Hariharan illustrates another figure in the Mahabharata who could be regarded as the very incarnation of penance is Amba. When Amba beseeched Bhishma to let her go and marry a man of her choice, he accepted her wish and allowed her to go but unfortunately the King of Salwa rejects her saying that it was Bhishma who had a rightful claim over her as he had won them all in the swayamvara. Amba requested Bhishma to marry her only to be snubbed by him. She wanted to take revenge on him so with the burning desire she goes to the forest to perform penance. The deity Siva was pleased with her penance, touched her garland and promised her that whoever wore it and fought Bhishma in a battle would be able to kill him. Amba then searches for a king who would wear it but finds none. Dejected, she throws the garland over a pillar in the court of Drupada, goes to the forest and burns herself.

Sita, in the face of the rebuttal from her father-in-law, hung her head over the veena for a while and then pulled the strings out of the wooden base. This, the grand mother tells Devi, was an act of penance on the part of Sita that reminds one of the posture adopted by Gandhari in tying her eyes with a piece of cloth. Sita never touched veena from that day onwards and devoted all her energies and intellect in making her husband a success in his professional life. Throughly ‘exorcised’ by the words of her father-in-law, she came to believe only in “order, reason, progress.” With her immense self-confidence, she donned the role of the savior of the family's prestige and fortune.

The romantic story of Nala, the King of Nishadas and Damayanti narrated by her grandmother resurfaces in Devi’s consciousness. Devi’s ‘swayamvara’ is a parade of prospective grooms and their parents, judging, assessing and

apprising her. It is not a Prince towards whom Devi takes excited steps but Mahesh, a punctilious Regional Business Manager in multinational company of detergents and tooth paste. Devi's laden childhood is far removed from banal and prosaic choice she makes:

If I was going to play out a travesty of the myths that had filled my childhood, I would tear aside all pretence, I thought, I would be as matter-of-fact as Mahesh (23).

Grandmother's stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata focused on women's pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. Grandmother's stories seek to establish a link with lived experiences; myths for her were possible resolutions of a perplexing reality. In her imagination Gandhari is joined together with Sita, Devi's mother, in their fate and their acceptance of it. Gandhari, wedded into magnificence and opulence but with a blind man, chose to embrace darkness voluntarily by blindfolding herself. Her blind foldedness is a mute protest against the tyrannical authority that had extinguished radiance from her life.

Sita, as a young daughter-in-law had protested in Gandhari's fashion. She was a gifted veena player; her sublime rendition on veena drew tears from the listeners. She had also been trained to be docile and a useful daughter-in-law, until one day, when she so engrossed in her veena playing that she could not listen to her father-in-law's voice. This inflamed him and ordered her not to play veena there after. As a symbol of protest, she pulled out the string and stopped playing it. She sacrificed her music to do the role of ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. The two women Gandhari and Sita became the symbol of self-denial, sacrificing one's identity and accepting identities that are thrust upon them.

Women Status

The Thousand faces of Night is a novel of three women – Sita, Devi and Mayamma who represent three different generations, more than thousand faces of women in India who still have no better existence than night. Many of our Indian Women like Mayamma, illiterate and unaware, have no idea about what they really wanted to be. Sita is a middle-aged woman whose lot is little better than Mayamma's lot because she dominates the family because of her knowledge. She sacrifices her talent of music as she wanted to become a good wife and daughter-in-law, but her desire could never be fulfilled, as a result of which she faces a sense of discomfiture and futility. Devi, returned from USA, represents the present-day intellectual women but she too fails, confronts loneliness and alienation. After her marriage with Mahesh, she moved to Bangalore where her spouse is working. Migration to a new place, the vast emptiness of her in-law's home, her husband's long spells of absence, the lack of a proper companion, the death of her father-in-law and her inability to give birth to a child lure her to Gopal in whom she imagines that she has found an ideal companion. She elopes with him.

Devi, the protagonist of the novel, is not a passive acceptor of what life could offer. She does not accept her grandmother's versions of Amba, Gandhari and Damayanthi and the other Puranic women. In fact, she transforms herself into an active participant, viewing them as a source of over-rich, and unadulterated nourishment. The stories fill her mental canvas and act as a tool of empowerment. She says, "I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut off all evil, magical demons". (The Thousand Faces of Night 41)

There is a peculiar love-hate relationship that Devi shares with her grandmother's stories. Though she does not fully agree with her grandmother's stories, she feels desolate when her grandmother dies. Her life becomes traumatic ever after when the mythical nourishment is deprived. After isolating from her parents, she realizes that she become a psychological destitute. Her attempts to date with Dan, to establish a home at Jaracanda, her elopement with Gopal and her

final reunion with her mother can be seen as frantic attempts of an alienated woman trying to seek a haven of shelter and security.

Having listened to the stories of her grandmother she was prepared for a crude, oppressive onslaught. She recalls from her knowledge of mythology certain images of suffering and revenge:

I read about Kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted Each age has its Kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a Kritya (54).

Acceptance of Penance

Devi accepts penance as an inevitable part of woman's life: "That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance" (67). The notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women-victims. Devi had the immediate example of her mother-in-law whose story was told by Mayamma. Devi informs her husband that she had intimate affairs with five of her boy-friends before marriage apart from the amorous relationship with Dan in America to hurt his male-ego. Mahesh brushes it aside which accentuates her inner turmoil all the more. She obviously searches for more pungent forms of revenge. She derives satisfaction in not being able to carry children for Mahesh. She considers it a powerful weapon to be hurled against him. Childlessness, she feels, was the price she had to pay as penance for her marriage with Mahesh.

Mayamma narrates her tale of tears and traumatic experiences and how she came to be attached to the family of Parvatamma. She got married at her young age to a ruthless man who "grew a little more crooked everyday" (80) after marriage. He was interested only in devouring her body while her mother-in-law was keen on having many grandchildren. As she did not bear children for over a year she became the object of ridicule and the consternation of family members. A woman is always looked down upon if she does not bear children for a long time. Motherhood provides redemptive factor for a woman in the Indian context.

Mayamma's mother-in-law advised her to do penance to change the course of the horoscope. She prayed, made vows and dipped herself at four in the morning while starving every other day. Ten years of penance, she thought bore fruit as she was blessed with a son on an auspicious day but her hopes were short-lived. Her son fell ill and died after prolonged illness.

After hearing the stories of penance, Devi finally decides to leave Mahesh which provides substance to her life and she considers her 'first real journey'. Devi gets attracted towards Gopal because of her husband Mahesh's rudeness and selfish attitude. She elopes with Gopal but within a very short time, after experiencing the male world, she ultimately decides to return to her mother.

CONCLUSIONS

The author clearly illustrates how Amba and Sita adopted themselves to the environment and sacrificed their emotions, ambitions, feelings and individuality for the sake of their family. In general women are compared to candle which stands for self-sacrifice. Here in this novel we come to understand the women characters like Amba, Sita, Gandhari and Mayamma project themselves as a symbol of suppression and penance. As soon as Gandhari realizes that her husband is a blind man, in her pride, in her anger, without uttering a word, she tore off a piece of cloth and tied it tightly over her eyes. Gandhari is the best example to exhibit self-sacrifice and penance.

In similar lines, Devi's mother Sita, only to prove herself as dutiful daughter-in-law, renounces her Veena. One can assess Sita's choice of opting penance; from her brooding: "...the central motive of years of blind suffering was

no piece of fiction. Gandhari's anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold burnt in a heart close, very close to mine"(Hariharan 29). The author wonderfully presents the effect of stories told by the grandmother about mythical characters on the life of Devi. When doctors advise fertility course to Devi to attain motherhood, Mayamma, on the other hand, advises her to practice penance, as Mayamma's mother-in-law advised her to do penance when she was child-less. "... She invited penance as an old friend" (Hariharan 80). The notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women victims in the novel.

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AUTHOR'S DETAILS



The first author (Dr. J. Sundar Singh) has been working as Professor and Head, Dept. of English at Karunya University since 1999. His area of Specialization is ELT and Applied Linguistics. He has 20 years of vast experience in teaching and having 10 years of research experience and has guided 2 Ph.D scholars and is guiding 6 Ph.D scholars.

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The author won cash award of Rs.5000 for having given 100% result in University Examinations, handled spoken English class for MBA students during course of his service, conducted National Conference, Literary competitions and initiated to inaugurate Communication Club to strengthen communication skills of Engineering students. He became BULATS examiner by Cambridge University to assess LSRW skills of Students. He has faith in Jesus Christ, the savior of the world.