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WOMAN AT CROSSROADS IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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ABSTRACT

Seeing women here, there and everywhere in all professional fields is a common sight these days. They turn against the inequality in relationship and unfair distribution of responsibilities imposed heavily upon them. But to achieve this hard task, Indian women have to cast aside the narrow traditional mental framework which pushes them back to their secondary status in society as well as in family. The age old conflict between woman's own desires and ancient social practices find expression through the voices of various women novelists writing in English today. All the female characters in the novel of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* find themselves on the verge of internal dilemma due to the various reasons and the aim of this paper is to find out the situation of uncertainty in choosing between the two different options lying before them in different circumstances.

Key words: Conflict, Dilemma, Uncertainty

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Women in India seldom treat on par with men. Even in the twentieth century, she has been living a hard life under the impact of the masculine world in spite of her unparalleled academic excellence and viability. Pilloried, repressed and victimized, she is still fighting for her independence and autonomous existence. Though no doubt there are lot of significant changes in socio-political scenario due to wide spread awareness among this so called marginalized section of society through education and media, woman is no longer an embodiment of excessive endurance and silent suffering in the avowedly post-modernist world. In fact, she has proved the strength of her nerves by creating a niche for herself even in adverse circumstances. Still, she lives in a bipolar world: the world of her own dreams and aspirations and the world of designed for her by the male -oriented society. Chris Weedon describes this point of view in terms of poststructuralism. As he writes *In Feminist Practice and Post structuralist Theory*: "the position of feminist criticism both actual and potential as an area of struggle with in the broader discursive fields of cultural criticism and sexual politics, is an important question for feminists since it concerns our power to change existing social relations"(138).

In *The Thousand Faces of the Night* Githa Hariharan depicts the dilemma of the female characters of three different generations having different life styles. The plight and predicament of woman have been

presented in the novel by the novelist after a minute observation of the inner psyche of self-sacrificing Mayamma, assertive Sita and rebellious Devi. By and large, all of them are found themselves trapped in the web designed for the woman by centuries of social conditioning. The novelist sensitively portrays the condition of Indian woman caught between tradition and modernity. Devi, the protagonist around whom all the characters whether male or female move and leave an indelible mark on her life, passes through a situation of contradiction arises between the two worlds. When the novel begins, Devi is shown as a young girl with a modern outlook. She lives in America and loves an American boy, Dan. But at the same time, she worships her mother in the temple of her heart. She is well aware of this unforgettable reality that her traditional mother and her open minded boy friend would never come to terms with each other. " Dan was different . His charm lay in the vast distance they have travelled towards each other, and in Devi's awareness that this distance was not, would not be, completely bridged. This awareness hovered over them like a memory, protective because it remained undiminished" (5).

Deeply influenced by the American culture, Devi is keenly interested in staying there forever but she fails to find an optimum solution to her problem. There are two opposing forces inside her and one tries to overpower the other. Love for her mother is no less significant than her strong inclination towards the world of her dreams. Finally, Devi comes back to her homeland half heartedly. The sky of her new life is pleaded with the clouds of doubts. There is confusion all around. "when the plane was finally ready to take off, there was no one to turn to, and say good bye. As she ran up to the waiting plane, she felt her American years slip away from her shoulders and trip her in the dank, stagnant puddles around her feet the brief dream was over. She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet halfway, naked and vulnerable, her home-coming." (11). Being aware of her feelings of vulnerability, she deliberately goes for them. In this connection, Jean Baker Miller rightly says that women have this unique ability in them and they consciously adopt it, accept it and ultimately make it part of their life for the sake of others.

Women like Devi suffer inwardly though she questions herself for her own decision. As a radical one, she suffers and struggles to free herself from the shackles of traditional thinking but it soon ends in stifled whisper. "Why did I come back? I am not sure Perhaps it is still too soon for me to understand." (16). Devi's fate is not different from any other Indian girl as she is supposed to be used as a utility item by some one for his sexual gratification. Her mother, Sita burns midnight oil to find a suitable groom for her dearest daughter. She is presented before the suitors and their families as if she is a commodity ready to be sold in the marriage market. For Devi, there is no other option but to abide by the rigid social norms in form of her mother's wishes. But in her heart of hearts, she fails to reconcile herself to the fact that her life is going on in a right direction. Still, she loves Dan and recalls those moments she has spent with him looking at the special gift which Dan gave her and finds herself in a flux. She compares her past with the present and is in doubt for her future: "Between interviews with bridegrooms, my womanly modesty protected by six yards of silk, I steal into my room with the package. I spread out the shirt and the swimsuit with the plunging neckline on my bed, and gaze at them wonderingly as if they are relics I can not place in time. I roll up the fine, soft synthetic in my hands and bury my nose in it, as if I can smell out a clue some connection which would link these two obstinately disparate chapters of my life" (20-21).

In our social set up, a young girl is brought up with the concept that she never put forward her views as far as the matter of her marriage is concerned. It is considered to be the most important duty of her family to choose her prince charming. Due to the feminine traits installed in her, she puts a hold on her likes and dislikes. As a result, she feels suffocated and the burden is too heavy for her to carry it. Suma Chitnis discusses it in detail in *Feminism Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions* and comes to the conclusion that Indian women show little protest against the decisions imposed on them by the patriarchy. In comparison to their American counterparts, they easily accept their lot and lead a circumscribed life. In a workshop, Suma Chitinis observes the difference in the outlook of Indian and American women on the subject and their problems faced by them in their respective societies:

At one point in the discussion one of the Indian participants used the word 'compromise' to describe her accommodation of the conflicting demands upon her in life. All the American participants took a negative view of her situation. To them the term connoted a denial of autonomy and freedom, an unhappy compulsion to accommodate into her plans and aspirations something that she would have been more comfortable without. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of the Indian women seemed to consider compromise positively to view it as the most acceptable of conflicting obligations, of pressures satisfactorily resolved.(94)

The spirit of compromise in a girl's continues even after marriage. Devi's marriage with Mahesh, a young man with no sentiments brings miseries to her life. Her husband's strange behavior fills her mind with many questions. "Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling hand maiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood." (54). Devi is right in her observation that her education never helps her in bringing real happiness for herself. The clash between tradition and modernity leads her life in an unknown direction. According to Patrocino P. Schweickart, "For a woman, then, books do not necessarily spell salvation. In fact, a literary education may very well cause her grave psychic damage: 'Schizophrenia' is the bizarre but logical conclusion of our education" (447).

Unlike the traditional Indian wife, she starts putting question marks on Mahesh's masculine domination and utters to herself desperately. "All the same, I felt abashed somehow. I could here my mother's voice melting into Mahesh saying but what is all the fuss about ? what would I answer?" (72). Her loneliness never leaves her even in the gamut of women around her. In a confused state of mind, she realizes her own place: "As the hostess, around, on the edges of, all circles" (73). In fact, she is out of tune with her loved ones from the outset, she is bound to play the role of a poor puppet whose strings are in the hands of others . Everyone tries to mould her as they wish. But there is no one to whom she cries out for help and expresses her own unmet needs. Poised between two worlds, she becomes a victim of hang up. The situation of Devi is similar to a ship moving in the sea without a fixed destination. All her hopes are shattered and she does not know what to do and how to do to lead a life of her own choice. In her dilemma, she gives a shrewd account of her life: "But I was too-well prepared, and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda Road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from all my trails, my tail between my legs, just as I turned a blind eye to my father's helpless thrashing about for an ally, or my mother's lonely hand stretched out towards me" (137). Luce Irigaray holds that woman in such a situation is divided between two selves –outer and inner. As a result, she turns into a non-entity having no ambitions and aspirations of her own.

On the outside, you attempt to conform to an order which is alien to you. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything that you encounter. You mime whatever comes near you. In your hunger to find yourself, you move indefinitely far from yourself, from me. Assuming one model after another one master after another, changing your face, form and language according to the power dominates you. Sundered By letting yourself be abused, you become an impassive travesty. You no longer return as the indifferent one. You return closed and impenetrable. (73-74)

Like Devi, the tale of her mother Sita is committed to the male-centred social set up. She fully understands the secondary status of women in the overall environment that surrounds her. As a highly ambitious woman, she craves for higher things in life. Her husband Mahadevan's sudden rise in his profession is due to her unparalleled support in every nook and corner. It is she who has made everything possible. Even her husband's sudden demise does not break her and she remains to be a strong powerful woman for the sake of her daughter, a single ray of hope in her dark life. After leaving her love for her veena, she cuts herself from the world of emotions and does not show her trauma to her own family. Nobody breaks her silence. To quote Helen Cixous:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language shipping away-that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression is

for a woman to speak even just open her mouth-in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.(880-81)

When Sita's only daughter Devi gets married, she has nothing to think about. There is nobody who needs her love and care. She is left behind with two different options and is not able to choose one for herself: "she could now see her life almost as entirely; certainly it was too late for sudden reverses, or a fresh start outside the parameters she had constructed, or allowed to be constructed, around her" (107).

Playing the role of a care taker for others, woman hardly give importance to her own dreams. She finds contentment in the happiness of others, but a feeling of conflict is hidden underneath her artificial smile that usually lies on her lips in order to maintain harmony among all her relationships. In sharp contrast to the passive and submissive traditional woman, the woman of twenty first century finds herself at a midpoint where there is no escape from an impossibly complex proposition. This kind of problem gives way to other innumerable problems in her life. She knows no option to get away from such an incomprehensible conflict which becomes a major cause of her secret anxiety.

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