



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE  
AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)

A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS  
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

<http://www.ijelr.in>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec. )

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MYTHOLOGY – A SUCCESSFUL TOOL TO GITHA HARIHARAN

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ABSTRACT

Literature is a tool to human society to learn and to reproduce the ideas. It uses myths and fables to impart good things among the people. Mythology is the most significant part of Indian culture and tradition. In literature, approximately all the genres, directly or indirectly are influenced and affected by mythology. . Mythology is like the touchstone to check the quality of life of individuals and society. Githa Hariharan has used myths as a powerful tool for her writings. Especially in her first novel, The Thousand faces of Women; she has used myth as a significant and to justify the position of women in society. Her novels depict the problems of women, their place in society and the discrimination they bear as their destiny.

With the help of the mythical stories she exposed patriarchy; its practice to create an ideology that is biased. She fulfilled her motive of helping women by reinterpretation of these stories in feministic perspective; for the freedom and equality of women in Indian patriarchal system. She gave the concept of new women, who fight for their rights and equality. Thus mythology helped her for her successful writings.

Key words – Mythology, The Thousand Faces of Night (TTFN).

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Mythology is the most significant part of Indian culture and tradition. Mythology affects all the parts of life: social, religious, political, economic, literature and national as well as international relations; because it sets the ideology for the people in different ways. In literature, approximately all the genres, directly or indirectly are influenced and affected by mythology. Some writers use it as a tool to titivate their writings but for some others, it is a weapon for justification. Myths connect us to culture and society. According to M.H. Abrahams they are:

“A system of hereditary stories which were 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.” (A Glossary of Literary Terms.P. 178)

In Indian literature, the two grandiose epics Ramayana and Mahabharata serve the measure mythological themes. The most scrupulous use of these myths can be seen in the renowned works of Salman Rushdie, Sri Aurbindo Ghosh, Girish Karnad and the contemporary fiction writers such as Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Nair, Manju Kapoor and Githa Hariharan. Myths explain well the values, morality, and rules of life of our ancestors. Mythology is like the touchstone to check the quality of life of individuals and

society. Myths are connected to the contemporary life to shape and repair the system. Contemporary Indian writers use myths in their novels and stories to articulate the difficulties of the contemporary period. Indian writers are using myths in their novels to interpret the ideology created by mythology in past and present times. Githa Hariharan's novels are also enriched with such stories. Her use of myth in her novels is the passion for storytelling but has become the tool for her to justify the position of women in society. Her novels depict the problems of women, their place in society and the discrimination they bear as their destiny. Her novels give the true graph of the real status of women. The technique used by Hariharan is a connecting energy through all her novels: "that of reinterpreting myth and legend in the service of themes and issues dearest to her heart. She makes her concerted use of myth and folk tale to enlarge the space of the lives of "real" people, especially women." Once Hariharan was asked that how myth is an important aspect of people's lives in modern Indian society, especially in women's lives? She replied that:

"I think myth has always been important in all cultures. I think today that it is particularly important, even in the west, where you have a certain breakdown of conventional frameworks, where institutionalized religion doesn't really work as it did, and so there's a great desire to make contact with this vast, apparently irrational baggage, that you carry around with you. So, I think the myth is always important for people everywhere; there's always the need to reinterpret and see for yourself what myth means for you in your times". (Susheila Nasta P. 23)

Githa has used and revised the ancient myths in a feminist approach opposite to the use of patriarchy. Indian women bear the inequality, discrimination, and loss of their identity at the hands of ideology created by patriarchy with the help of mythology. From ages stories of Sita, Gandhari and Savitri are the role model for ideal Indian women. Grandmothers teach lessons of sacrifice, tolerance and self-negligence from very childhood to their granddaughters. The ideology of ideal women is set in the minds of girls with the help of mythical stories. Girls are taught to be patient, polite, obedient and meek because this is the universal belief, in the mind that women are created by God, only to serve men. Without men, they cannot have any identity; marriage as well as motherhood is their final Destination in life. Hariharan said that,

"In India myth has always been important- myth, folklore, the oral tradition- all these flow into one another, you can't really separate them...There have always been any number of versions of myths, which is very important to remember." (Susheila Nasta P.23)

In Githa Hariharan's novels, this reality of patriarchy or male dominating society is disclosed with the help of different examples. The best use of mythology in Hariharan's fiction can be seen in her first novel **The Thousand Faces of Night**. It is a novel that presents the true picture of women's status and relation of mythology with patriarchy and feminism. She has woven the feministic concept of the novel with the threads of mythology. The concept which makes Hariharan different from other feminist writers is the technique of creating characters quite parallel the mythical characters. The images painted by Hariharan do not give an artificial apparatus but realistic one. The myth of Devi can be observed everywhere and in every character of the novel. she introduces the mythology through the characters of Devi's grandmother and her father-in-law. These characters are the epitome of patriarchy, who tries to build the psychology of Devi as per the Indian social setup. They used to teach her the ideals of an ideal woman. Hariharan contrary to patriarchy reinterpret the myths through the character of Devi and throws light on the rotten system of Indian society which makes the life of women alike the hell. Devi's training for being an ideal woman, perfect wife and obedient daughter-in-law started in her childhood at her grandmother's house. Devi herself told the importance of mythological stories narrated by her grandmother as:

"My grandmother's stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chooses each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out. Like the sugar shapes she made for me, a rich, over-sweet syrup that was magically transformed over the fire into ornamented little elephants,

swans with each feather delicately etched, her stories fashioned moulds. Ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors". (TTFN P.27)

She was prepared to behave like an ideal woman from her very childhood. She started living in the world of imagination but Hariharan changes the idea of painting the picture of an ideal girl as per patriarchy. She transforms Devi's imagination into feminist ideas and give us a character who take steps towards self-identity. Her grandmother narrates the stories of Damyanti, Gandhari and a woman married to snake. Each story is related to a character Devi encounter in her life. Gandhari's story is linked to the life of Devi's mother Sita, Damyanti inspired Devi herself and the story of the woman who married to the snake is related to grandmother's maid. The stories of Gandhari, Sita, and woman who married to snake are women who were obedient to their husbands but the stories of Amba and Kritya were rebellious. Devi was studying in USA but came back home because her mother wanted her to marry. Devi does not want to marry but for the sake of her mother's wish she agrees to marry; she gets ready for her swayamvara. Here the ideology created by her grandmother can be seen clearly. She went back to the past in her childhood memories, when she was six years old. Her grandmother narrated story of Damyanti to her. She told her the meaning of swayamvara by narrating the story of beautiful princess Damyanti's marriage. She sets the picture of the scenario of Damyanti's marriage in Devi's mind which became the blueprint for her life. Devi's grandmother narrates the story in a very dramatic manner that she never forgot the story and started dreaming the same in her life. Devi tells us that in

"Grandmother's stories, there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending. No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own home-made yardsticks of life. (TTFN P.20)"

Devi recalls her grandmother's mythical stories again and again at every point of her life. Her life was moving parallel to those mythical stories because of the deep imprints of them on her soft heart from childhood. Once Devi herself said that stories of her grandmother 'are like prelude to my womanhood an initiation into its subterranean possibilities.' (TTFN P.51). Once Devi visited her grandmother's house and there she found a photograph of her mother holding a veena in her hands. Pati got a chance to relate the story of Gandhari in a patriarchal manner to build up the sense of sacrifice and tolerance in Devi. She asked Devi that 'Do you know about Gandhari, my little one? Listen; listen and you will learn what it is to be a real woman.' (TTFN P.28) She narrates the story again in a grandeur style. When Gandhari met her husband for the first time she was shocked to know that he is blind. She in anger took a very hard vow that she will not see the world again and bound her eyes with a veil. Devi reacted shockingly and asked Pati that why she was not told before marriage that her husband is a blind man. Her grandmother replied very gently that 'because, my child, a woman meets her fate alone.' (TTFN P-28). Not only has this but Pati given a patriarchal description to Devi about the superiority of husbands when Devi asks that 'if he was so noble, why did he agree to marry her?' (TTFN P29). Pati makes her understand that 'all husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and deaf ones.' (TTFN P29). 'In her pride and anger Gandhari could say nothing but to blindfold herself.' (TTFN P29). Grandmother said that Gandhari was not only a proud woman but she accepted her destiny with self-sacrifice. Hariharan explains the real motif of Gandhari's such action. She said that

"You don't really know in the Mahabharata, and there are many number of interpretations, about her motive. The traditional interpretation is that look at her, she's such a royal wife, he is blind so she'll be blind too..." (Susheila Nasta. P.23)"

Devi's pliant heart started believing that Gods can make changes in the destinies of mortals but her interpretation of Gandhari's story was very different from that of Pati. She explains that: "I listened to my Grandmother's interpretation of Gandhari's choice, but the lesson I learn was different. The lesson brought me five steps closer to adulthood. I saw, for the first time, that my parents too were afflicted by a kind of

blindness. In their blinkered world, they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another". (TTFN P.29)".

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Devi's grandmother narrates the mythical story of Amba to her, to build a courage to fight with the injustices and discrimination. A swayamvara of three sisters – Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika was established by their father, the king. Amba the eldest choose the king of Salwa and garlands him. Suddenly Bheeshma kidnaps all the princess for his brothers by his step mother. Amba tells them about her marriage with the king of Salwa. They sent her back to her husband but the king of Salwa denied to accept Amba as her wife and insulted her by saying that, "Do you think I feast on left over's? I am a king. I do not touch what another man won in the battle. Go to Bheeshma. He won you when his arrow struck my eager hand on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me?" (TTFN P.37) The same reply she got from Bheeshma. Hariharan picked this phase of the story to make us aware that, how women are treated as objects by men dominated society. Women do not have rights to choose their way of life. They are shown puppets in the hands of men. The first half of Amba's story presents the true status of women in the society. But the second half depicts that how a woman alone can change her destiny with courage. Amba was disappointed but she never loses hope and planned to take revenge on her destroyers.

Devi stops her grandmother and asks questions arriving in her mind. She asked her grandmother that, "why didn't Amba's father stop him? or Salwa? or any other else?" (TTFN P-36) and "why didn't she go back home?" (TTFN P.38). The replies by Pati to her questions were purely patriarchal in their meaning. She replied that "once he had laid his manly hands on her shoulders, Devi, she was no longer a girl. A woman fights her battle alone." and "A woman without a husband has no home." (TTFN P-38). Grandmother's definition of marriage to Devi was purely influenced by patriarchy, she said that:

when you marry, Devi, your heart moves up to your shoulder and slips down your arm to the palm of your hand. The hand that holds yours tightly as you walk around the fire receives it like a gift. You can't do anything about it: when you marry, it goes to him and you never get it back. (TTFN P.37)

Hariharan took both the concept of Amba's myth parallel, the first concept discusses the status of women from ancient times. Our myths represent the truth of their position sometimes. In Indian literature, a divinity is bestowed on women in the form of goddesses but they are treated as objects. The second concept of the story of Amba is a satire on the patriarchal society. The second part of the story is the representation of revolt of a woman. Amba found no one to help her and she decided to go for penance for Lord Shiva. Lord Shive impressed from her rigorous penance gave her a garland and said: "whoever wears this garland will surely kill Bheesma." (TTFN39). The story of Amba is an exemplary voice against the tragic situations of women in society. Githa revisits this mythical story in the feminine perspective to project the position of women where she is not meek but revolts and proves that both men and women are equal. A.G Khan also praised Hariharan's first novel in this context. He said that:

"Acclaimed by Jurists all over the globe, runner-up for the prestigious award 'The Commonwealth Literary Prize'; Githa Hariharan's **"The Thousand Faces of Night"** is a significant contribution to women studies. It is a Mahabharata of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humility, arrogance, and submission. Githa's novel is a dignified contrast to Shashi Tharoor's trivializing mockery of the great epic The Great Indian Novel. She exploits the rich reservoir of our collective consciousness by peeping into the psyche of mythical characters- especially the women victims." (A. G. Khan.P. 135)

Githa Hariharan wrote her first novel when she was at the initial steps of motherhood. She has experienced the pleasure and agony of that period. Motherhood is always glorified in Indian mythology and it is the most important thing to complete the womanhood in India. Motherhood and marriage can be called the destiny of Indian women. They cannot think otherwise or out of this patriarchal pattern of marriage and birth of a child. Hariharan has explained the orthodoxy and rigidity of this concept through the story of Ganga and Shantanu. Hariharan's own experience of isolation before and after giving the birth to a child inspire her to write this story in the novel. This story explains the isolated state of Indian women. The story of Ganga and Shantanu is the last story told by the grandmother to Devi when she was sixteen years old. Her grandmother told her the stories from Indian mythologies because she has seen the world and she wanted Devi to be ready emotionally for all the situations she must meet in her life. These stories are like the emotional support and direction in women's life. Githa explained her idea during an interview; she said that:

"But the story that grabs you is that she is drowning her seven children. Motherhood is not something that is pretty tender or even the other side of motherhood that we talk about, which is the first year of giving up your job and sitting at home with the baby, and there are times when you want to throw the baby out. The boredom and the desperation and the loneliness that is also legitimate." (Rosemary Sorensen. P. 43)

One day King Shantanu went to the bank of river Ganges and met a beautiful maiden there. He proposed her marriage and she agreed on a condition that he will not question her for her actions. They got married and then the tragedy starts when the maiden gave birth to a child. She dropped that child in the river Ganges. Shantanu followed the promise he had made before marriage but he protested when she continuously killed the seven children in the same way. The queen gave birth to the next child, hand him over to Shantanu, and drowns herself in the river because he violated his promise. Pati told Devi that river Ganga is known for purifying the sins of mortals and the queen drowned in the river to purify her sins. Devi did not get the meaning of the story at that time but realized the meaning when she got married and wanted to be a mother. The meaning she understood from the story is: "to be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to earn the title, just as you have to renew your wifely vows every day." (TTFN P .89). The story telling by grandmother was the preparation time for life.

Hariharan portrayed the character of Devi to show the revolt of a woman who has grown with the ideology inserted in her mind by patriarchy through mythological stories. Devi's real journey started from the house of her grandmother, she prepared the way and identity of womanhood. Her life goes on with ups and downs with many problems; she tackled them on the basis of stories narrated by her grandmother. Hariharan

acted as an agent to end the patriarchal system by the historical process, by using the myths as her tools. The mythological narratives play an important part in creating philosophy. Hariharan knitted the story of Devi and the stories of other mythical women together in the same weft. Indian families have special likings for myths and stories. Hariharan has used these mythical stories as a tool in her all novels successfully. With the help of these mythical stories she exposed patriarchy; its practice to create an ideology that is biased. She fulfilled her motive of helping women by reinterpretation of these stories in feminist perspective; for the freedom and equality of women in Indian patriarchal system. She gave the concept of new women, who fight for their rights and equality. The new woman is Independent and economically strong. Hariharan has effectively explained the value of mythological stories; women can give strokes to the ideology created by patriarchy and can create a new world of equality, independence, and happiness.

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