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GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*: A REWORKING OF MYTH  
AND FOLKLORE ON CONTEMPORARY LINES

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ABSTRACT

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, talks about the ventriloquisation of women's voices by the British colonizers and the Indian leaders. According to Spivak, this act of ventriloquisation suppresses the real voices of women which lie hidden. Githa Hariharan, in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, tries to retrieve the lost voices of women by showing how they stand opposite to the traditional modes of representation and the novel becomes a gynocentric version of the Mahabharata. Through reworking of old myths and folklores on contemporary lines, reshaping personal dilemmas and offering new vistas for women; Hariharan joins the bandwagon of modern Indian women novelists in English.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* may be read as revisionist myth-making program in which the novelist attempts to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths and folklores. It is through these myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crisis of identity. The novel also peeps how the female point of view differs from the male discourse, especially in context of the mythical tales from Mahabharata and the folk stories.

In this paper, I have attempted to appraise critically how the women in *The Thousand Faces of Night* tear apart the network of myths and folklores to eke out a space for them. So, the novel is not only about the narration of variegated patriarchal myths and folklores but also about survivals from those myths through resilience on contemporary lines.

**Key Words:** Myths, Folklores, Stature of women, Patriarchy, Identity crisis.

India has a rich legacy of mythical stories and legends which form an integral part of Indian literature. The use of myths in a realistic fiction causes displacement to maintain realism in the text. Northrop Frye defines displacement as "the technique a writer uses to make his story credible, logically motivated or normally acceptable" (Frye156). The myths of Indian womanhood, so far been written by men, have been used as an instrument to support the patriarchal ideals. The behavior patterns of an Indian woman are

predetermined by the myths of Sita and Savitri. Women are seen as custodians of cultural particularism and so are controlled in different ways to preserve national, cultural and ethnic identities. But the slow and steady changes in social, cultural and economic patterns of life have altered the nature of reality for women and have generated in them a sense of freedom and resistance against patriarchy. An upsurge in feminist writings gave rise to a conflict between tradition and modernity. The 1980's was the era of the so called myth-busting. Indian women writers with a feminist approach began to step out of shadows and rewrote mythology from a female point of view. Rewriting or retelling myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and man-made laws are subverted.

Githa Hariharan is one of the most prolific women writers of India. Githa has become a literary luminary with her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* which has added a feather in her cap -the Commonwealth prize for best first book. A feminist at the core, Hariharan is particularly concerned with women's issues, and enjoys a crucial place in the history of Indian English fiction. In her books such as *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, Hariharan engages herself with the task of reinterpreting the traditional myths. Hariharan's protagonists such as Devi and Vasu master protest against the normative and the dominant and try to excavate the submerged or eroded stories. Githa Hariharan's debut novel is a feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewritten and retold from a gynocentric perspective. We can say that Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* 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 and folklores.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* writes about role of myth that supplants the actual experience of women with a transcendent idea that is not subject to the flux of time. The myth of 'Eternal Feminine' stands in sharp contrast to the "dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual Women" (Beauvoir 239). This cobweb of myth helps to categorize women into the strait-jacketed domain of either an angel or a demon. The ultimate goal of all myths fabricated by the patriarchal society is to produce a docile female body that will not pose a threat to the phallogocentric world; a discursive body that will help to uphold the normative regulations of patriarchy. Therefore, any attempt at dismantling this system of signification must start with deconstructing the androcentric myths. Hariharan tells in an interview that these myths:

Being part of both individual and social, attempts are made to reinterpret them again and again to become the dynamic voice of every age giving voice to contemporary concerns, evolving, modifying and sanctifying values as they adapt to different time and space.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* is a scathing criticism of the way the women are compelled to perform the subordinated roles as decreed by the patriarchy. Through the help of various myths and folklores, all of which descended from patriarchal tradition, the male world tries to subjugate the women and instill into them a false consciousness. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, sees through the falsity of mythical stories and the so-called grand-narratives of patriarchy. The various accounts of trials and survivals given by the women characters in the novel ranging from the earlier narration by the grandmother to the misery of Mayamma open up a discursive space for women to initiate a feminine discourse. So, this novel is a microcosm of Indian women experiences which assembles a diversified group of women in the intricate plot.

The middle-class South Indian life portrayed in *The Thousand Faces of Night* brings together a number of women whose diverse experiences reveal the various ways in which they are subjected to the oppression of the male-dominated Indian culture. The plot of the novel revolves around the lives of women in South Indian towns which refer to the sexual discrimination and its unabashed power-politics of denigrating the stature of women. In this novel, Hariharan has represented three generations of women who are separated by the gulf of time but are linked by the shared reductiveness of their gender. Devi, her mother Sita, her grandmother and Mayamma, subjected to torture, voice their protest in their own subtle ways.

Devi, the protagonist belongs to the third generation who returns to India after spending a few years in America. From the beginning of the novel, we see how Devi is denied the choice of her own and is subjected to go through the demands of man-made order. While returning home, she ends her desire and has to leave

behind the memories of Dan, a Black African with whom she forged bonds of friendship while studying in America as it does fit in with her tradition, for a better life in India which her mother promises she sure would find. She returns from America to India to find herself hedged in with the traditional roles assigned for the women making her a prey to the chafing pressures imposed upon her by the old existing order, a demanding mother's love. The institution of family is that nucleus in which Indian women are taught to find their fulfillment. In spite of her higher education in the US, Devi must be married to an eligible groom and embrace the role of a house-maker. Devi was taught in her childhood of how to be a good woman, a good house-keeper, and find her completeness in motherhood. Her mother arranges a swayamvara for her that shows how marriage is posited as the reason for being in a traditional Indian family.

The main story of her life is written by Devi herself and into this frame a number of other stories are incorporated; the legends of the mythical heroines narrated to Devi by her grandmother; the stories of wives and sants and other pativratas recounted to Devi by her father-in-law and real life experiences of actual women either observed by Devi directly or narrated to her by Mayamma, the family retainer in Devi's father-in-law's house. C. Vijayasree opines:

This commonplace story of marital discord and woman's quest for identity outside marriage is turned into a remarkable rendering of the collective struggle of women for self-liberation through... the tales from the Mahabharata to folk stories and her deft inter weaving of these with the lives of real women. (Vijayasree177)

The fictional nature of the idea of 'Eternal Feminine' is decoded by Devi's uneducated grandmother who used to tell her stories about "virtuous" women in Indian myths redefining the man-made myths. Devi's recollections of her grandmother's stories infuse her with an indomitable spirit that prepares her to launch a battle later. Devi becomes familiar with the legends of mythical heroines narrated to her by her grandmother. The grandmother's interpretation of the ancient myths is refreshingly modern, asserting the individuality of women as human beings and endorsing their resistance to oppression. Grandmother's narration is a kind of revisionist myth-making in its own right. The grandmother doesn't dwell on the prominent figures of the Hindu myths—Sita, Savitri, Damyanti or Anasuya often celebrated as paragons of female virtue. She rather retrieves marginal figures from Mahabharata like Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who protested against exploitation in their own powerful ways. So, the grandmother reworks the myths of Gandhari, Amba and Ganga on contemporary lines that stand pole apart from the masculine versions.

While replying to Devi's question about her mother Sita who is seen holding a veena in her hand in a photograph, the grandmother tells her the story of Gandhari. It is generally believed that Gandhari in Mahabharata, blindfolded herself as a dutiful wife because her husband Dhritarashtra was blind. This is male's interpretation of the myth, but the grandmother's interpretation of this mythical lore is different. According to her, Gandhari, after marriage, got angry on knowing that she was married to a blind man. So, she blindfolded herself as a mark of protest against the injustice imposed on her. Devi's mother Sita resembles Gandhari. Sita has a passion for playing veena but the day her veena invites the anger of her father-in-law when he finds all things undone in the prayer room, she protests in Gandhari's fashion. She pulls away the strings of her veena and never plays it again in her life. She abandons her talent in order to be a perfect house keeper and a blameless wife. This is not a weak submission but her way of protesting.

Devi's cousin Uma got married in an affluent family. But one day Uma's drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips. Uma left that house and came back to stay with her grandmother. When Devi questioned her grandmother about Uma's brief marriage, the grandmother narrated the story of Amba, "the princess who shed her womanhood through her dreams of revenge and become a man" (Hariharan35). Amba was kidnapped by Bheeshma on the day of her swayamvara when she was about to garland the King of Salwa. But later rejected by both - Bheeshma as well as the King of Salwa; Amba, with a desire to take revenge, went to the forest to perform penance. Reborn as Drupada's daughter, she went to the battle of Kurukshetra to see Bheeshma's death. "A woman fights her battles alone" (Hariharan36), says grandmother. This filled Devi with

great courage as she says, "Close to death, she made me a gift of the ultimate fantasy: a woman avenger who could earn manhood through her penance" (Hariharan36).

That motherhood is not simply about giving birth to and feeding the child but also about performing rigorous practices continually is shown by the story of Ganga. While walking alone near the Ganga, king Shantanu came across a beautiful damsel and fell in love with her. She reciprocated his proposal with the condition that he would not stop her from doing whatever she wanted. The king agreed only to find her throwing her new born babies into the waters of the Ganga year after year. When Shantanu, unable to tolerate this, urged Ganga to stop when she was about to throw her eighth child into the water, she said, "Then take him and be father and mother to him. I shall not free him from life" (Hariharan88). She did all this to protect her sons from a curse. Through this myth, the grandmother teaches Devi that "to be a mother at all, you have to earn the title, just as you have to renew your wifely vows every day" (Hariharan89).

The mythical tales narrated by the grandmother sowed the seeds of individuality, woman's dignity, and protest against injustice in Devi's psyche so much so that when she grew up she strove to maintain the values inculcated in her mind by her grandmother. She observes: "Her stories are mere a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities" (Hariharan51). In this context, W.S. Kottiswari states, "The mythical stories become so much a part of her life that Devi thinks of herself as the very incarnation of all the avenging deities" (Kottiswari 94). Devi says, "I became a woman warrior, a heroine" (Hariharan41).

Hariharan deconstructs the myth about the stability in marriage through the marital relationship of Devi and Mahesh, a chauvinist. The arranged marriage proves to be a complete failure. Devi wants an equal share in her matrimonial relationship but Mahesh never recognises her individuality and doesn't give her independent space. His authoritarian behaviour haunts Devi and she finds herself in an anchorless universe when Mahesh refuses to grant her freedom of choice. He refuses to consider her problems seriously and ignores her aspirations. For Mahesh, marriage is only "a necessity, a milestone like any other" (Hariharan49). When Devi expresses her desire to take up a job, Mahesh refuses saying "There is so much for you to do at home" (Hariharan56). He even does not attempt to understand her innermost feelings:

He snarls instead about women's neuroses and my faulty upbringing. Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An animal fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali around my neck? (Hariharan74)

In keeping with dominant patriarchal set up, the only thing he expects of Devi is to produce children. Mahesh's constant absence from family results in the lack of real bond between the husband and the wife. Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba.

Devi seeks solace in the company of her father-in-law, Baba. In her spare time, she listens to the stories that her father-in-law tells her about "virtuous" women of past days who are still worshiped today for their noble devotion to their family. The retired professor of philosophy tells her that a good wife is the threshold of her husband's entry into the heaven. Baba tells her stories "that hold back this yawning emptiness" (Hariharan68). The stories of grandmother are very different in nature from those of Baba. While the grandmother's stories enlarge boundaries, Baba's stories define limitations. As the narrator observes:

His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtues will wear. They make one point in concise terms: that the saints lived according to the laws of time-tested tradition. (Hariharan51)

Devi herself exclaims, "Baba's stories remind me of my grandmother's but they are also different.....Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits" (Hariharan51). Baba replaces the grandmother's goddesses with Brahmin saints like Jeyadeva, Purandara Dasa, Narayana Tirtha, Syama Sastri. All his stories present before her the picture of a virtuous wife whose only task is to protect her husband and put her on spiritual pedestal thereby depriving her of the right to be human. The tale of Muthuswamy Dikshitar's second wife is intended to convey how a woman subdues her wishes. The tale

of Jayadeva's wife who is honoured by gods, redefines her husband's identity as 'the husband of Padmavati.' Sarasvati Bai's greatness over the miserly husband Purandara Dasa, ultimately wins him over. Narayana Tirtha's wife's selfless devotion initiates him into Sanyasa. So, Baba's stories focus on virtuous wifehood. On one such occasion, her father-in-law tells Devi, "it takes the wife's flame of dharma to light within a man" (Hariharan 66). J. Yellaiah and G. Pratima observe this as a "cunning twin-construct of woman's deification and her confinement in domestic space"( Yellaiah and Pratima 188).Grandmother's stories being female discourse represent an escape for Devi from patriarchal defined womanhood which Baba's stories endorse. Baba asks Devi never to forget that she is a Brahmin. "A Brahmin", he said, the words of Manu giving his voice a new authority "shrinks from honours....humility he covets .....He who has inflicted the humiliation perishes" (Hariharan52).

Devi learns the household works from the old maid-servant Mayamma in Mahesh's house who, at first, was not willing to hand over her domination over the kitchen to Devi. Devi listens to the story of Mayamma ,who was married at twelve, is trapped by the construction of motherhood .She was tortured by her animal like husband and cruel mother-in-law and was forced to undergo ten years of penance for her inability to conceive a son:

She woke up at four in the morning and walked among the blue tipped shadows to the pond. She prayed, made vows, and dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness. She starved every other day; she gave up salt and tamarind. (Hariharan80)

Finally a son was born to her but her miseries did not come to a halt as the son became a wastrel and a complete nightmare for Mayamma. He warned to beat his mother and sold her last pair of gold bangles before he died. On the day of his death, Mayamma, as a mark of protest, burnt her horoscope along with the body of her son. She gradually learnt the strategies of survival as she herself put it, "I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry" (Hariharan126).

Parvatiamma, the mother of Mahesh, stands as an ardent feminist who does not buckle under the onslaughts of patriarchy but rejects them to uphold a space of enunciation. Parvatiamma left home in pursuance of God at Kashi - an incident that does not match middle-class mentality. Devi learns about her from the maid-servant Mayamma. Parvati, as Mayamma tells Devi, relinquished her motherhood and embraced spirituality as means of way out. According to the traditional myth, Parvati is the helpmate of Shiva and she helped Shiva attain the status of yogi by taking charge of the household activities. "But", observes Sarita Prabhakar, "in the novel Parvati turns the story upside down as she gives up the life of a householder" (Prabhakar 57).

Devi's interest in life is renewed with the arrival of Gopal, a classical singer. She finds momentary joy through a brief relationship with Gopal who comes raking embers buried in the ash of her hopes and dreams. She decides to move out of Mahesh's life: "I will walk on seeking a goddess who is not yet made" (Hariharan95). She accompanies Gopal on all his concert tours but as months pass, she no longer enjoys Gopal's company. However, she is unable to get permanent happiness through this relationship as she thinks him as a dancing peacock, solely concentrated on himself. Her admiration for him wanes since she discovers that he is a flirt.

Devi's life comes full circle with her choosing to come back to her mother to begin her life afresh. Discarding all ties, she is able to find a liberating space for herself. This homecoming might be regarded as, in Kristeva's terms, the celebration of the semiotic over the symbolic. This time, she doesn't look for anchors outside herself "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning" (Hariharan139). As she enters her mother's house, she hears the music of veena played by Sita who too is reborn as she retrieves her lost self by returning to her veena.

The end of the novel marks the beginning of a meaningful joint pursuit with separate independent goals and values. Mayamma no longer faces the threat of a drunken husband or a tyrannical mother-in-law. Devi escapes her husband's indifference and her own nonchalance into her mother's world of music. Sita also

asserts herself by renewing her contact with the world of music that offers her a creative individuality. The music of the veena signals the end of chaos in the mind and a beginning of a life where women will have a room of their own. Nirmala Varghese finds in the persona of Devi “an archetype of transformation and redemption” who “undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals from passing from adulthood” in achieving her distinct voice. Her heart bleeds, she watches the thousand hideous faces of night, but achieves enlightenment in the end. Devi learns the strategy of survival which is the highest ideal in the struggle ridden life of women. C. Vijayasree remarks:

The mothers of Devi's rebirth are, thus, manifold. Besides her mentors, there are many other women whose lives offer new and useful lessons to Devi. She draws on her biological matrilineage as well as spiritual and mythical heritage. The invisible energies of the ancient goddesses.....genetic inheritance from all women who lived in the past ages and experiential wisdom of her own contemporaries —all these contribute to the eventual psycho-spiritual growth of the protagonist. (Vijayasree 181)

To conclude, GithaHariharan's protagonist, thus, shows the possibility of liberation from the restrictive myth of womanhood in an authentic Indian background. The counter-hegemonic act, though difficult, is not unattainable. Jon Mee aptly remarks: “In many respects, it also marks a coming-of-age of a certain kind of women's fiction in English in India, one that is written undisguisedly in ‘a woman's voice’, a condition-of-woman novel” (Mee 228). Thus, the weight of mythical prototypes on Indian women's minds and the modes of defiance presented through three different generations of women in this novel, heralds the era of women's awakening through reworking of old myths and folklores on contemporary lines.

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#### Brief Bio-Note

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