

# Indian Women's Inner -World and Female Protest in Githa Hariharan's Novel '*The Thousand Faces of Night*'

Hanaa Bajilan

**Abstract**—Gender statuses are inherently unequal; it is difficult to establish equality between men and women in the light of traditional inequalities across the world. This research focuses on the similarities and differences among women from different generations, different kinds of educational backgrounds and highlights the conflict experiences of the characters in Githa Hariharan's novel "*The Thousand Faces of Night*". The purpose is to show how women are suffering and are being humiliated in a male-dominated society. The paper depicts how women in India grapple from male domination aggressiveness as well as the cultural, social and religious controlling in the society they live in. The paper also seeks to explore the importance of knowledge as a powerful component which produces positive effects at the level of desire. The paper is based on the theories of Simone Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Rene Descartes and Amy Bhatt. Finally, the research emphasizes survival against hegemonic regimes and hope of Indian women for better life.

**Keywords**—Equality, gender, Githa Hariharan, humiliation, identity, Indian women, knowledge.

## I. INTRODUCTION

FOR Indian women, re-writing myths is an approach of emancipation by which beliefs and traditions get re-composed and male laws almost are ignored. Githa Hariharan is an Indian author from a Hindu background, she clearly uses *Arabian Nights* in "*The Thousand Faces of Night*". Hariharan is one of India's top female authors, creating novels and short stories on women and society issues. In 1993 for her first book, "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" she won the Commonwealth Writers Award 1992. "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" is a novel written from a feminist perspective about three Indian women characters: Devi, Sita and Mayamma who belong to different generations and different educational background. Thus, the novel explores the inner-world of Indian women, but, "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" is different from other Indian-English fictions in its subject matter. The novel tries to cut up the confined social structure that restricts women's role in a male dominated society as India.

The novelist's clear expression and vivid portrayal troubles faced by Indian women highlights the conflict experiences of the characters in "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" who suffers between tradition and modernity. Throughout history, women are still being imprisoned with old traditions, canons and beliefs. "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" is a journey of Indian

women through tradition to modernity in search of self-identity. This research questions how women can reach their desires, it emphasizes on the power which produces positive effects at the level of desire. The best solution in this case can be done through knowledge as a basic component of the desired future.

Women can challenge the traditions tactically using knowledge as a device to reach their goals. In other words, it seems that young ladies in India are not only dominated by men's authority, but also with their mothers, grandparents and mothers in law. The novelist exploits the rich pool of Indian collective consciousness by drawing an analogy between mythical figures and the contemporary world: "All these women have trouble adjusting to a constricting and dehumanizing environment into which they find themselves trapped. They are unstable people, unable to cope and survive in world which seems to deface their identities. They are slowly, but inexorable driven to the brink of extreme mental distress or suicide".[1]

Hariharan raises social, cultural, and ethical concerns. Hariharan's vision for women is one of empowerment. The protagonist finally rejects her 'other' status in order to return to her mother or roots and recreate her true identity. Simone de Beauvoir, a French intellectual, writes in her book '*The Second Sex*' about the role of myth in replacing women's real life experiences with a spiritual concept which is not subordinate to the fluid flow of time.

"The myth of 'Eternal Feminine' stands in sharp contrast to the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual Women. Beauvoir, argues that some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with the bitter pleasure of self-recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world. Her remorse and the pity she feels through her daughter for herself are manifested in endless anxieties; she will hardly go a step away from her child; she will sleep in the same room with her for fifteen or twenty years; the little girl will be destroyed in the fire of that restless passion" [2].

The central thesis of *Mile de Beauvoir's* book is that since patriarchal times, women have been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many ways to that of racial minorities despite the fact that women constitute at least half of the human race, and

Hanaa Bajilan is with Bucharest University/ Interdisciplinary School of Doctoral Studies (ISDS), Romania (e-mail: hanaabajilan84@gmail.com).

that this secondary standing is imposed by strong environmental foes rather than natural 'feminine' characteristics. This, according to the author, has resulted in a general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievement in many fields but has also given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly corrosive effect on men-women sexual relations.

## II.FINDINGS

Fundamentally, this paper portrays female characters, marriage becomes an instrument of women's exploitation and sub-negation leading to loneliness, depression, incapacity and lack of communication. The term feminism is fabricated in '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' and it made a strong impact in India in which feminism after all is an anti-social term and as a consequence men have to play a notable role in conducting about change of a definite kind, wherein women do not have to automatically demand respect but can command.

It could be suggested that "Human beings have a complex network of power relations and there are various models of submission and domination in this power struggle. Dualistic thinking based on the binary oppositions such as 'culture/nature', 'head/heart', 'form/matter' is related to the opposition between man and woman. Some feminist critic's advice to keep the Indian social structure in mind when attempting feminist criticism in India. While studying Indian women novelists we have to understand the difference between east and west. The model should not be rigid. The 'female' body can be made docile, submissive, erotic, usable and productive. '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' represents a variety of female characters, mythological (ideal) and real, with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony, searching for self-identity or self-liberation" [3].

According to Rene Descartes' theory in "*Passions of the Soul*", he argues that the passions of an individual experiences firstly depend on the shape and the texture of a person's brain and secondly, they depend on the body: "all the other parts of our brain are double, as also are all the organs of our external senses-eyes, hands, ears and so on. But in so far as we have only one simple thought about a given object at any one time, there must necessarily be some place where the two images coming through the two eyes, or the two impressions coming from a single object through the double organs of any other sense, can come together in a single image or impression before reaching the soul, so that they do not present to it two objects instead of one" [4].

Devi, the protagonist of the novel, is also the narrator who re-tells the stories she listens to or observes. Devi, was a good observer and listener, even though she had the feeling of not belonging to the place she lives in, she was struggling with what was happening in this society. According to Edward Said in '*Orientalism*', he proclaims that "Exiles feel an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this

triumphant ideology-designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole – is virtually unbearable and virtually impossible in today's world" [5]. In other words, Said shows the importance of not mimicking your identity and being someone else by hiding or neglecting your own identity.

Hariharan created a brave heroine in her protagonist, who struggles for her identity. There is a desire of liberation from male controlling and restricting women's role in general. As such, in '*Arabian Nights*' stories, Scheherazade succeeded to change King Shahryar by acculturating him with moral lessons because she guides Shahryar through her strong personality. In contrast, Devi in the end had only a hope to change her life in future. The narrator of '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' highlights moral lessons about different experiences in life whatever if they really exist in the world or it is from the author's imagination; dreaming for better future and fight for women's identity:

"Githa plays with the binary images of 'good' and 'bad' women. She shows struggle between tradition and modernity. Patterns of women's life in a Hindu cultural society. Devi, the protagonist, undergoes an identity crisis even after following the norms set by the society. She constantly faces the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, dilemma of cultures western versus eastern, dilemma of mind (knowledge) versus heart (true knowledge) and dilemma of being a 'good girl' versus 'bad girl', The crisis 'to be or not to be a good girl' haunts her and the agony of identity crisis attains the desired intensity through the use of myths" [3].

In Pierre Bourdieu's work "*Gender and Symbolic Violence*", he argues that "the practical acts of knowledge and recognition of the magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated that are triggered by the magic of symbolic power and through which the dominated, often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed, often take the form of bodily emotions-shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt or passions and sentiments love, admiration and respect" [6]. In other words, this paper focuses on how each female character in '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' was suffering from humiliation, guilt and alienation from her own body in a traditional way to create the image and even the ideology of womanhood in India, which means that they are expected to be good wives and mothers in future. This involves obeying the rules and old traditions neglecting the desires and ambitions of women and here comes the idea to rebel against men authority and fighting for self-identity, liberation and equal rights with men in general to have a successful life both in marriage and different relationships in a society. The social awareness and awakening which women are experiencing in the world find certain scope the reality and myth of Indian social life are very well echoed by the author's writings in which she criticizes, truthfully and fearless in her meditations. Feminism is a weapon and a tool to remedy lots of wrongs in societies, committing in the name of outdated patriarchal principles, which involves man's superiority. In recent years, feminists have argued that marriage is often enforced as oppressive in spite of its benefits.

In the words of Simone de Beauvoir in *'The Second Sex'* she says "marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always it annihilates woman" [9]. Moreover, not all communities accept the idea of women being equal with men so in many cases it is only propaganda. Advertising the ideal life of liberation and equality, women are still struggling to be out of this mass authority imposed by men.

In the past women were always neglected, in the globalization age such as in India and the Middle East, women are suffering more, even now in the postmodern structure, the crisis of women's identity is still problematic. Hariharan expresses the crisis of identity through the representations of the female characters in *'The Thousand Faces of Night'* woven together effectively to show that it is a new beginning and there is hope to make women's dreams come true to be independent individuals having the ability of making choices by replacing the traditions to something better. Devi, as an educated and rebellious character, made a turning point against her husband Mahesh by humiliating him:

"Humiliating Mahesh I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with. ... You have trampled on your marital vows. I say like Ganga. For that you will be left alone, without wife or child. I will gather together the fragments which pass for my life, however laughably empty and insignificant, and embark on my first real journey...I can learn to be a woman at last. I will soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas" [7].

Sita, Devi's mother in *'The Thousands Faces of Night'*, sacrifices herself to the gods of reason and progress. Moreover, being a perfect daughter-in-law is even more important than being a good wife in Hindu society. Devi's mother has destroyed her ambition to be a musician and this desire could never be fulfilled. In spite of her daughter's Western education in America, she wanted to take Devi back to obey the Indian rituals. The novel represents obviously the female characters fighting the idea of the ideal woman which is required from them to be perfect wives, daughters and mothers in the society.

As such Amy Bhatt, a professor of gender studies at Maryland University claims that:

"The new Indian women became an icon and an identity that straddled this socio temporal paradox between modernity and tradition by asserting national, cultural differences in the home, a place distinct from the world. Symbolically, representations of women thus resolve the national identity conflict between the constructed binary of tradition/modernity. The image of the obedient self-sacrificing mother gave way to the newly liberated women who were integrated within the public sphere" [8].

Through politics of gender, this paper attempts to negotiate the contradiction inherent in globalization politics. In other words, the social awareness and awakening which women are experiencing in the world find certain scope in Githa Hariharan and how she criticizes, truthfully and fearlessly in her meditations both the reality and the myth of Indian social life. Mayamma, another female character in the story, suffered from the survival strategy. Hariharan portrayed Mayamma as an ideal female character, she married at the age of 12 to a drunken

husband and she could not find any alternative choice so she accepted her fate. Life for Mayamma is a life of ruled gender. Bhatt argues that:

"Several Indian women writers have attempted to transform woman's statue from victimization to empowerment and project a new sense of woman s identity. Githa Hariharan in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* also deals with the question of women's identity and her innate strength lies in her struggle for survival. Dissatisfied with age old norms that emphasize woman s passive role as a wife, Githa Hariharan attempts to establish a new order. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman s role and edifies the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self" [10].

Furthermore, Hariharan intersperses the events with folklore and myth with the social status of women within the boundaries of space, time and region. In *'The Thousand Faces of Night'* Hariharan presents a chain of several events related to men/women, love/emotions, and death as well as painful loneliness. This novel exposes the underworld faces of Indian women's lives and highlights on the emerging womanhood. This also reveals women's quest for self-identity in the present world. *'The Thousand Faces of Night'* can be relevant to Scheherazade's character in *'Arabian Nights'*, throughout the idea of 'knowledge'. Scheherazade succeeded in re-building and changing Shahryar's madness through love and knowledge. For example, Scheherazade taught Shahryar love, humanity, forgiveness and justice. *'1001 Nights'* also questions how to survive in a world which accommodates good and evil? Similarly, *'The Thousand Faces of Night'* examines women's state in a male dominated society.

Women discrimination and negligence have been persisting issues all throughout history. This problem is still visible in this age of globalization, especially if we look at countries such as India. Githa Hariharan portrays the crisis of identity through the representations of the female characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* woven together effectively to show that it is a new beginning and there is the hope to make women's dreams come true since individuals are able to make choices by replacing the misconceptions against women and better understanding women's integrity.

Devi, in her isolated corner when she left America and went back home with a disappointing marriage, she remembered her last day in America when she saw a movie, Fellini's *Casanova*. In the film, Casanova had given pleasure and happiness to the women he seduced which is a dream of any woman when she marries. Marriage is love, protection; care beside a husband is like a father. Moreover, Githa Hariharan's protagonist, Devi, reflects the chance of liberation from the confining myth of womanhood in a genuine Indian background. The counter-hegemonic act, though difficult, is not unattainable. In *'The Thousand Faces of Night'*, we find women who are rebellious or negated as barren, who fight against forced marriage and being a tool for a man in a patriarchal society. In connection with today's world, for instance, women's rights and social statues in Iraq have been thrown aside and violated for several years. Today, women's rights struggle against intimidation,

while women are putting all their efforts to promote and improve women's statues in: education, the workplace and changing the canons and traditionally aspects such as; 'honor killings' when a woman loses her virginity without being legally married, her family judges her severely by ending her life. Furthermore, women's organizations are trying to replace and change 'forced marriages' as well.

Yet, women's challenges should be addressed if the lives of Iraqi women need many years of reversed development. Meanwhile, these challenges can be achieved not only by revolution, but also through education, cultivating narrow-minded people and establishing powerful laws that protect women. Moreover, the misconceptions, mass media and violence generally in Iraq beside the corruption in the law system are the major reasons which barrier women's rights. As an opinion, the best solution in this case is to develop and establish harmony among men and women relationships in order to build a productive, balanced culture and a successful society.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we need to avoid the stereotyping that forms discrimination: reduce violence and discrimination against women through attaching a value of inferiority or superiority of which human diversity is influenced by certain factors such as: ability, religion and ethnicity. Change always begins with the self. We may belong to groups that must follow strict rules or traditions set by others.

"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. Devi learns the strategy of survival which is the highest ideal in the struggle ridden life of women" [7].

Githa Hariharan makes us aware of women's subordinate and inferior status in the home and society. The time has come to grant women their rightful, equal, and independent status, which will help them grow as individuals and as social beings. Hariharan's female protagonists are aware of their own uniqueness and battle for a liberated feminist identity, following patterns of resistance, survival, inventive choices, and unity that lead to unexpected life tales.

Conflicts in gender and intergeneration relations: as often, immigrant women from societies with patriarchal gender relations, Indian women have been reported to welcome American notions of individual autonomy and gender equality more eagerly than men. Causing tension in marriages and in transnational encounters with India. Though freedom for women is still incomplete nowadays, we need to change, adapt and replace the origin without neglecting traditions but, the possibility of creating new canons to protect women's rights. Finally, a perfect world does not exist, especially for women, but they can hope for better life when equality with men could

be further elaborated in the future.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Darbha, Bhagavathi. A Study of Vedic Women With Reference to the Characters from Githa Hariharan's "*The Thousand Faces of Night*", Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 17(7). ISSN 1567-214x, 2020. Print.
- [2] Beauvoir, Simone. "*The Second Sex*". Jonathan Cape Thirty Bedford Square London, 1953. Sharma, Bhasha. Identity, Culture, and Sexuality in Githa Hariharan's "*The Thousand Faces of Night*". International Journal of English and Literature, India, 2013.
- [3] Chalmers, David J. "*Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*". New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.
- [4] Said, Edward. "*Orientalism*", Random House Inc., New York, 1979 (First Vintage Books Edition [http://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said\_Edward\_Orientalism\_1979.pdf])
- [5] Bourdieu, Pierre, "*Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*". Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- [6] Hariharan, Githa. "*The Thousand Faces of Night*", New Delhi: Penguin, (1992). Print.
- [7] Bhatt, Amy. Madhavi Murty, and Priti Ramamurthy, "*Hegemonic developments: The New Indian Middle Class, Gendered Subalterns, and Diaspora Returnees in the Event of Neoliberalism*," Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society 36, no. 1 (2010): 131.
- [8] Sasikala. Feminist Interpretation of Githa Hariharan in "*The Thousand faces of Night*". International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, India, 2018.
- [9] Bhardwaj, Neelam. Githa Hariharan's: "*The Thousand Faces of Night*" A Reworking of Myth and Folklore on Contemporary Lines. India, 2019.