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DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE AND LIBERATION – PERSPECTIVES FROM GITHA HARIHARAN'S , 'THE THOUSAND FACES OF THE NIGHT'.

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ABSTRACT

Women from ages past in life and literature ,especially Indian have been denied a subject position. Multiple forces of oppression, within and without, from kin and others have thwarted dreams, hopes and sometimes the basic right to a dignified survival. The negative processes of 'cultural othering', 'Inner colonization have played a significant role in shaping the female subjectivity and internal dynamics of an Indian woman. Resistance exposes the unjust practices in the dominant ideology, undermines the power of the dominant structure and eventually may carve out an equal dignified place for the subjugated and their practices. The discourse of Feminism tries to present the ideas and attempts of women against the oppressive patriarchal order for the purpose of freedom to



construct their self and Identity.

Githa Hariharan in her works, explores the questions, the dilemmas, concerns and implications of the resistance of female subject under oppression and her eventual liberation. In the novel, 'The Thousand faces of the Night', she presents the myriad images of Marginality, Othering, Resistance and attempt for Liberation. This paper tries to explore the various perspectives of Oppression, Resistance and a liberated woman through the characterization of Devi, Sita and Mayamma. Each protagonist representing a different category of women, relegated to the

margins, their resistance and self exploration for Identity and rewriting 'Her'story.

KEYWORDS: Indian woman ,characterization of Devi, Sita and Mayamma.

INTRODUCTION:

" I am no one, she thought, as she swept along in the rich current of Gopal's voice, I have no husband or lover, only this blissful anonymity in the darkness, filled with a raga that reaches higher and higher, beyond the earth-bound demands of passion." (TFN 128)
So moans Devi, the protagonist of 'The Thousand faces of the Night, near the end of the

long journey towards self –realization and self-definition. Tradition and tales, rituals and rehearsals, myths and misinterpretations have relegated women to the margins and only amplified their subaltern position. Their presence is dependent upon, they are named after father, husband or lover. Demands of being the right daughter, right sister, right wife, right mother crush their free spirits. They are indoctrinated about the suitable conduct and behavior right from the delicate age of childhood. Githa Hariharan is a feminist voice with a desire to reclaim the freedom for woman in every field, personal and professional. She poses a lot of questions to an ill-balanced society which breeds inequities, absents the 'presence' of a woman and mutes their voices. Her characters are Indian, and they resist the dominant ideologies and

structures which deny them a 'self'. She presents her female characters as Survivors- who go through an intense psychological struggle, 'revisit' their pasts, reassess their present and re-invent their 'self'. In her novel TFN, captures the plight oppression and exploitation of a 'denied' self of the Indian woman through her characters Devi, Sita, Mayamma and others. Devi is a young woman, educated in the US, yet finds herself stifled in the confines of an 'arranged marriage', agreed to satisfy her mother. Sita is the all caring, all knowing, all meticulous, perfect housekeeper, devoted to lifelong dutiful caretaking of the house, husband and daughter. 'Mayamma' the aged maid servant, surrounded by her gods and goddesses, married at twelve, brutalized by a unloving husband, unrelenting, heir-demanding mother-in-law and a wastrel son.

BURDENS AND OPPRESSIONS

Devi, though capable and articulate is relegated to the burdens of being led by the norms and rules of an established order – education, marriage and motherhood. Though her dreams soar high, her reality is the spirit of a caged bird. While studying in the US, she makes friendship with a black American Dan. Devi finds Dan different in an 'all white' campus and is enamored by his charm, but she relegates the relationship to the 'regions of fantasy' from the beginning. Their friendship quickly turns into courtship and even a proposal for marriage is made by Dan. The 'burden of Indianness' prevents her from 'merging with the oases of color and spontaneity', that is Dan and his people. For her, Dan was an 'experiment' and the possibility of imposing 'permanence of marriage' with a foreigner was somehow 'obscene' even to the western educated young Indian woman. His charm lay in the vast distance they had travelled towards each other, and in Devi's awareness that distance was not and would not be completely bridged. This awareness hovered over them, like a 'memory, protective because it remained undiminished'. Her best moments of 'free self' were with Dan, yet the image of 'the regal, virtuous bride' so constantly formed by the recurrent letters of her mother, became so embedded deeply, that she couldn't but deny Dan. Even an intelligent woman like Devi, we find, is struggling to break free from the clutches of tradition and siding with the forces that will only bind her further in future.

The 'Conditioning' and the 'Unconditional response'

A woman is socialized since birth to feel and act in a specific way where she is the man's 'other'. As Simone de Beauvoir in her magnum opus, 'The Second Sex' said, "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), Indian women are conditioned so that they end giving unconditional responses to the societal norms.

Devi's mother, Sita slowly but surely tightens her grip on her foreign returned daughter and leads her to the marriage altar. The first step was a re-entry into the extended family and then the marriage alliances, the Horoscope reading, meeting the prospective in-laws and the hypocritical bridegrooms, the visit of the Exorciser, become part of the Conditioning process. After meeting five or six prospective bridegrooms, Devi finally accepts the proposal of Mahesh. Soon, Devi finds that marriage of a woman, is no way near to the 'swayamvara' she heard about from her grandmother in childhood. She has no right to choose, no self will to decide, no courage to say 'No', no chance for a delay or examination of the groom. Everything happens for the male party, she is only an 'Exhibit' and eventual accomplice. Here, the author presents the gradual 'cultural othering' that takes place in raising up girls and preparing women for marriage. The need to be a good wife, and to fit into the expectations of husband and in-laws is drilled from the beginning. She is no more consulted or is needed to be concerned about Education or family management or personal dreams, once marriage proposal takes place. For Devi, her education abroad and her present preparation to be a suitable bride, in her own words seem 'two obstinately disparate chapters of my life' (TFN 21)

Another person, Baba, her father in law, a prototype of male patriarchy, pours his age old ideals of 'wifehood' into Devi's mind. 'His stories always have for their center-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife.'

Resistance and Reality

Devi's grandmother was a wizened old woman, illiterate and widowed in her early thirties, she fed Devi with stories of stories of princes and princesses, of accepting and following, of longing and surviving, of love and rejection, and of living and being. These stories though were said to create a certain response as a woman in her future life, they evolved in Devi the desire to question, to search and seek her own identity and the reality of a woman's life hidden under the hard rock traditions that these stories have built in the minds of men and the psyches of women. As Devi

confides,

“I must have, as I grew older, begun to see the fine cracks in the bridge my grandmother built between the stories I loved, and the less self-contained, more sordid stories I saw unfolding around me.” (TFN31)

Devi interrogates and the concerns and actions of her grandmother's characters, which reveal many facets of female oppression and demand liberation. In the story of Damayanti's 'Swayamvara'

“the sun shone more brightly than usual”

‘Why, I asked,

Because the Sun knows where its getting its light from, she said” (TFN18)

It implies that the source of a woman's knowledge, truth is not herself, they are always derived. About Gandhari, she questions..

“But, why didn't they tell her?

Because, my child, a woman meets her fate alone.” (TFN28)

Which implies that a woman, no matter who she is, is always alone and lonely to meet her fate, everybody leaves. Again, in the same story she, says,

“if he was so noble, why did he agree to marry her?

All husbands are noble, Devi, even the blind and deaf ones.” (TFN29)

A woman has to adjust to whatever she gets, she has no right to choose or change the mate. The process of 'Indoctrination through these stories tend to relegate the Indian woman to the margins, with no voice, her concerns unvoiced and her presence a mere blur, in the vast tapestry of male dominated Indian living.

Voicing and Muting

The husband- wife interaction is one area where the recurrent aspects of subjugation and subalternity are clearly visible. The voices of the husband are to be heard and the voices of the woman are muted. This tends to occur at every juncture, and unheard concerns create a vacuum and emptiness in the female psyche. Hariharan alludes to the same in the interactions between Devi and Mahesh, sita and mahadevan, mayamma and her husband. When Devi asks permission to learn Sanskrit,

“I want to learn Sanskrit”

“Don't be foolish, he said, ‘the English translations are good enough and what will you do with all this highbrow knowledge?’” (TFN54)

When Devi complains about Mahesh's long trips and absence from home..

“why don't you postpone the trip?” I said

“why don't I pray to be born a woman in my next birth, he teased. ‘Then I wont have to make a living at all’” (TFN80)

Even an Intellectual like Devi, at every instance, has her voice muted. Her husband, Mahesh, the self contained, self indulgent man, never gives her a proper hearing and pressurizes her to become a mother, but is never bother bothered to love her. This process of 'Muting' corners the woman's identity, pressurizing her to define herself in male terms.

The Being and Non-Being

The condition of the subaltern woman in particular is even more precarious, where disillusionment is accompanied with physical and mental abuse, all in the name of duty and dharma. Where subaltern women are concerned, imposition of force, destructive violence is perpetrated on the body and the psyche. Mayamma, the maid servant of Devi, was married at the age of twelve and the astrologer promised that she would bore many sons.

Her unloving husband, a crooked man, a gambler and a debaucher, was only interested in satisfying his carnal desires and nothing else.

"Her husband woke her up every night, his large, hairy thighs rough and heavy on her, pushing, pushing." (TFN80)

She was unable to bear a child; she did penance every day to appease the gods and goddesses. Her domineering mother in law, always abused her, made her to work day and night, never gave her enough food, and pushed her to do penance for her cursed fate.

"No, no Maya, no rice for you today. It's Friday. No rice today, no vegetables tomorrow, no tamarind the day after. Stop thinking of food, daughter in law, think of your womb. Think of your empty, rotting womb and pray." (TFN114)

She was reduced to 'non-being', she was never loved, and all that was expected from her was to bear a son. After ten years of penance, a son was born, and eight years later, her husband disappeared taking all the money in the house with him. Her nightmare and tormenter, her mother-in-law suffered in old age and mayamma had to take care of her. Her son, raja became a wastrel and ill-treated her, he even hit her for money.

"I waited ten years for a son. Years came and went, so did astrologers. I was destined to have a son, they said, to be taken care of in my old age. I scared destiny away with my over eager pleas, my weekly fasts, my silent and humble apology to an impatient mother in law. She tore my new saris and gave me yesterday's rice to eat. What is the use of feeding a barren woman?" (TFN112)

The day her son died Mayamma wept profusely. She wept for her wasted youth, her husband, the culminating of a life's handiwork, her son, as all were snatched from her. Her life was now nothing, her endless toil, her hard earned son all were now nothing. The meaning, hope, destiny, and the dream everything was but a cipher. The seamless suffering now ended, she began to be a being.

Liberation and Survivors

Hariharan is not just satisfied with presenting the plight of subalternity and subjugation of women, she tends to create more positive reactions from her characters. They are not just oppressed, voiceless, muted, subjugated, brutalized victims, they are survivors. They make their own stories, they are not told by 'them', but they are 'Her' stories. They reclaim their lost identity; they reinvent their present and revision their future lives. Mayamma now cooks only for herself, lives a life undisturbed by anyone, and leads a tranquil, peaceful life in her old age. She is a survivor, she burns her 'horoscope' the image of her oppressed past of a perfect destiny of a woman, 'motherhood', on the pyre of her son. Sita, the perfect housewife, after Devi's escapade with gopal, begins introspection, and like a reinvented Gandhari, opens her eyes towards the 'veena' her lost real self, and begins a new journey. She is a survivor, she sends all her servants and gardener away, leaves the 'garden and flowers', the image of her bondage to perfect wifedom, to themselves. Pati, Devi's grandmother, as her years near her end, stops telling the stories of virtuous women, and like a survivor, changes her 'Heroines' to more fighters like Amba, the snake lover, the female avengers. Devi, the dreamer, stopped running from herself. She neither found love and truth in her husband nor in her lover, like a survivor, started anew, and headed towards home of her mother. She left all the myriad reflections of her past behind, and for the first time in life began to think of her self with unburdened freedom.

Thus, Githa Hariharan not only attempts to foreground multiplicity, particularity and heterogeneity in the projects of enhancing scope of freedom and justice for women. She also projects them to have a 'voice' and 'presence' of their own, and presents a new image of a liberated Indian woman.

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