

Validating The Self: A Reading of Gita Hariharan's - The Thousand Faces of The Night

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Abstract

The present paper, VALIDATING THE SELF: A READING OF GITA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF THE NIGHT' reads the novel from a psychological point of view. It is incontrovertible that literary texts and life's existential realities are inter-connected. Literature is not written in a vacuum but in association to the prevalent notions. The novel will be read using the tenets of Stone Centre Psychologists based in Wellesley College USA like Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver, Janet L Surrey and many others. The study is an endeavour to probe how women to position themselves as worthy members of the community look towards external validation of their selves and for validation of one's self adhere to the self-image based on the traditional feminine of 'goodness' rooted in self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, which is strictly demanded by the patriarchal community. The research shows how this social role of deferring and attending to the emotional and physical needs of the others negating the needs of one's own self hinders an 'authentic selfhood' and reconciliation with the traditional feminine becomes conflicting and problematic though most of the women follow the set social pattern of taking on responsibility to the exclusion of self and adopt the feminine convention of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

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Introduction

It is incontrovertible that literary texts and life's existential realities are inter-connected. Literature is not written in a vacuum but in association to the prevalent notions. For validation of one's self, women adhere to the self-image based on the traditional feminine of 'goodness' rooted in self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, which is strictly demanded by the patriarchal community. This social role of deferring and attending to the emotional and physical needs of the others negating the needs of one's own self hinders an 'authentic selfhood.' Reconciliation with the traditional feminine becomes conflicting and problematic though most of the women follow the set social pattern of taking on responsibility to the exclusion of self and adopt the feminine convention of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

To position themselves as worthy members of the community most women look towards external validation of their selves. In a patriarchal set-up this hinders development of autonomy in them. The other set of women, in pursuit of an autonomous self and especially when they measure themselves against culturally valued masculine norms, turns to inner validation. Unfortunately in both the cases discontentment is their lot. In the second case it is because community does not lend social support to non-traditional women. To live in relationship is a basic human urge, hence community's ostracization and ridicule of women in self-pursuit, renders them unhappy.

Now a days modern day feminists believe that woman has already proved that she is capable of competing with man in every field and now it is man's turn to learn to develop respect and esteem for women's moral goodness

of nurturance and care. Men and women should complement and complete each other. They hold that woman should seek self-fulfilment without losing any of the immanence or characteristics of her basic nature. She should not close her eyes to the nobility of her feminine virtues but retain them. They hold that to be the equal of man she should not change herself but change the system that exploits and takes advantage of her goodness and devalues it. In contrast to the feminist literary critiques, focusing on the degenerative aspects of women's role as caretaker, their stunted growth of the self, the woman-centred psychology reclaims the ethic of care and its allied virtues, flourishing the generative and empowering positive aspects. Caretaking, nurturing, female bonding and interpersonal relations are not isolated to others, they have the capacity to empower the carer and create community feelings. The concepts of individuality and community so fuse in women's experience as to produce the embodied "We" as against the disembodied "I" of liberal feminism and define their self through the context of family and community. In the context of tradition-bound patriarchal Indian community, the formation of identity of a woman through elaborate socialisation is given a different dimension. Distinguishing between identity and self Jasbir Jain observes:

A woman's life is made up of multiple selves — social, familial and private that "not only overlap but also override and contradict one another" (Kulkarni 2001:154). To validate one's membership to a particular community an individual has to accept and adhere to certain principles it lays down. One's identity and membership is confirmed and accepted only if it fits into the framework of the definition handed over by the community. Jean Baker Miller in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* bases her discussion on inequality of sexes prevalent in a community and its consequences. According to

her the whole set is divided into two: the dominants and the subordinates and "in these relationships, some people or groups of people are defined unequal by means of what sociologists call ascription: that is, your birth defines you" (Miller 1976:6).

Generally the myth is maintained that women do not need power and do not and should not have power, whereas women have long been using their power to nurture, care and love to foster the growth of the others, effectively. They use their powers to empower the other increasing the others' resources, capabilities, effectiveness and the ability to act: ... in 'caring' or 'nurturing' one major component is acting and interacting to foster the growth of another on many levels - emotionally, psychologically and intellectually ... this is a very powerful thing to do, and women have been doing it all the time, but no one is accustomed to including such effective action within the notions of power. It is certainly not the kind of power we tend to think of; it involves a different content, mode of action, and goal (Miller 1991:198). The world would become a comfortable place to live in if all people tend not to limit but enhance the power of the other people while simultaneously increasing our own power, though it seems difficult to comprehend, for this is not how the world defines the power. In such a world, enhancing one's own power becomes extremely difficult for women for they have fears confronting it lest they should be branded destructive or selfish. Women use their power and abilities for others which is not bad but it creates tension and problems when it is prescribed for one sex only. Woman is seen in relation to man as 'the other', 'the second sex', created solely for him. She is seen as what man is not, and the man is seen as what woman is not.

One of Helene Cixous's most admissible idea is her analysis of the 'patriarchal binary thought' under the heading 'where is she?' She lists the following binary oppositions:

Activity/Passivity

Culture/Nature

Day / Night

Father/Mother

Head/Emotions

Intelligible/Sensitive

Logos/Pathos (quoted by Moi 1989:104).

The above listed binary oppositions are intensely imbricated in the patriarchal value system where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. If a woman dares to use power to enhance her development it is termed 'selfish' and disrupting the prevailing value system by opposing the feminine identity handed over by tradition. For fear of ostracization most women live up to the image of the dominants and concentrate on the needs and development of men. "It is obvious" Virginia Woolf says, "that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex". Yet, she adds, "It is the masculine values that prevail" (quoted by Gilligan 1982:16). This gives rise to covert and overt conflict. The research and polemics of the Stone Center psychologists are also applicable to the Indian situation, which too is basically patriarchal. Indian women are forced by tradition to curb their freedom, condition themselves to suppress their needs and sublimate their selves in martyrdom of self-denial, effacement and service of others like their sisters around the world. The ethics of the Indian society places the community above the individual and its membership is more of a duty to everyone. Traditions colour and contour the Indian womanhood and its power and hold on the collective Indian psyche demands conformity to the 'feminine mystique' syndrome. In the Indian social structure the legacy of cultural codes and tradition depict woman as a symbol of reverence, a 'Devi' and is desired to conform to all that the mythical 'Devis' like Sita, Gandhari, Savitri, Parvati symbolise. This does

not mean that in such a country where women are deified and revered feministic demands are needless. Reality comes limping when women suffer due to their blind conformity and complacency to these stultifying archetypal principles and their basic virtues are denigrated. In the light of the above discussion the novel *The Thousand Faces of the Night* by Gita Hariharan will be assessed.

I

Devi, the protagonist in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is one of the many females who have no choice but to judge themselves from the yardstick of others. Her relations with Dan, her Black-American lover are directly influenced by the dominant discourse. She dares not accept Dan's offer of marriage on two significant grounds -- first is more personal and the second more conventional. She rejects his offer because she sees the cultural divide, which she would not be able to bridge and second, he would not be acceptable to the Indian community. She goes back home and quietly agrees to marry the man of her mother's choice. But as Devi broods often, her education has left her unequipped to take life as it comes. She does not challenge the system openly, but then she cannot accept it either. Her efforts to play the traditional are thwarted by her husband Mahesh's taciturn attitude to love and marriage. To meet the demands of her unfulfilled self she turns to Gopal. By rejecting and walking out of her marriage she shows signs of rebellion, which the conventional community does not endorse. The fragile nature of her freedom is exposed when she is disillusioned with Gopal. She leaves him to return to her mother.

Ultimately, Devi accepts responsibility for her self, decides to "fight" and start life all over again. The author gives sufficient hint through Devi's self-assertion. Devi does not align herself to any community to gain her strength to be whole but the mythmaking process through which she learns about the

various legendary and mythic Indian women like Gandhari, Danayanti, Amba, Durga and others help understand the significance to give fight, and the implications of standing on her own. It is significant to note that the women reconstructed by her grandmother's stories are all self-directed women, those who have had the courage to show their anger, urges and inclinations.

Gender oppression is evident when Sita (Devi's mother) has to put aside the music, the needs of her soul and sacrifice her 'self' for the traditional duties of wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She embraces the traditional role model to authenticate her societal membership by stifling her own wishes and transforming herself into an ideal daughter-in-law. For years thereafter she depends on external validation for community membership but remains unhappy which is confirmed by her extreme silence and the rigidity with which she conducts herself in real life. Towards the end of the novel, she acknowledges her selfhood and the needs of her 'self'. We are not told of Sita's interaction with the community but her return to music and the welcome Devi gets are strong indication of the release of her 'self' from the clutches of the past.

Sita's husband is more like a wooden character. His inability to create emotional ripples in Sita's heart fails to generate attachment in her. They seem to be two bulls yoked together to cover the tedious journey of marital life. After her marriage Sita was forced to give up her playing on veena. Most of the time women's 'self-sacrifice' retards their own self-development. "Women have been so encouraged to concentrate on the emotions and reactions of others that they have diverted from expressing their own emotions" (Miller 1976:39). Wifery is considered the main aim and every woman who marries is expected to aim at its excellence. Sita too laboured hard and the "long hours she had earlier sat bent over her veena were now

spent in the kitchen" (102). Expert in management and economy, she runs the home deftly saving "a cabbage here, a spoon of oil there, and the hoard of small change in an old tea tin grew till it gave way to a little pile of crisp, clean notes, arranged in fives, later tens (102). Sita had eaten three square meals of rice before marriage. One night her husband found her ravenously eating chappatis left over from dinner at midnight which moved him and elevated her in his eyes as "a woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifice without fanfare" and won his "unswerving loyalty" (103). Her husband Mahadevan fails to realize how the chain of sacrifices made her stoical.

When her husband died alone in his room, she lifted his head and pulled out the papers containing an unfinished essay on African folklore on his table. She burnt them before him and poured the relics of body into one jar and came back "to set-up this house by the sea in Madras" (45). She seems resilient but more detached. It is towards the end of the novel she is shown to be a woman with a will of her own, resuming her love for veena.

II

In order to study women in community and understand women as community, it is necessary to study the attitude of the community towards women. This is particularly exigent in the Indian context as the hold of the traditional stereotypical image of women still has a strong hold on the Indian psyche and present day Indocentric approach to literature takes due cognisance of Indian social matrix to deal with the representation of values in Indian literature.

Devi unable to conceive for a long time is advised by Mayamma who had herself "waited ten years for a son" (112), to undergo penance to turn the wheel of fate. Mayamma records how her mother-in-law thrived on "the astrologer's promise that Mayamma would bear

her many strong grandsons”(80). Mayamma “prayed, made vows ... starved every other day, she gave up salt and tamarind ... She meditated for hours ... she fed the snakes her rice and curds ...” (80). Devi feels embarrassed by the “official reference” to her sex life and later she loses all zest for living when Mahesh refuses to adopt a child. Life becomes dull and Devi loses her sense of humour and “my girlish ability to giggle” (91). Generally marriage is projected as a norm and an end all and be all for women in the society. Ergo, they often “become the victims of an ingrained social pattern because right from childhood a girl is conditioned to think of marriage as her main goal in life” (Dharker 1997:124).

Devi like the other girls is “prepared” by her mother “for show” to be viewed “as a potential bride” by the Srinivasans (16-17). Srinivasans are, like in the matrimonial ads – looking for a “fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to 'adjust'” bride for their son (17). Girls are brought up in a way to please the groom and his relatives. Stress is laid on physical beauty especially fairness. Devi's grandmother would rub her with coconut oil and turmeric till she is “fair like Damyanti” (19). There are, however, instances, rarely though, when talent is recognised as more precious than complexion. In Sita's case her dark brown skin was overlooked for “overwhelmed by her talent” the examiners “had forgotten about her dark skin” (102). The stereotype ads concerning their role keep appearing in the media, which are the chief promoters of feminine traits and inequality. Marya Mannes puts it thus in *The Roots of Anxiety in Modern Women: What I call the destructive anxieties are not the growth of women's minds and powers but quite the contrary. The pressures of the society and the mass media make women conform to the classic and traditional image in men's eyes.* (1964:412)

The attempts to meet the rigid standards of cultural attractiveness result in conflict and depression.

Devi finds it hard to handle the ennui and drudgery of routine vegetative life after her marriage. Returning from America only to lead dull life, doing nothing is just not enough for her. Her husband, closing all doors to understanding, attributes her depression, conflict and discontent to education. Devi's husband is not a bad man. The protagonist is pitted against a male counterpart who is temperamentally incompatible and fails to share the interests of his wife. Mahesh is a typical traditional man who admits “wanting a woman at home who will be a wife and a mother” (22-23). He is reticent by nature, playing a “polite stranger” maintaining “restraint, his detachment.” He sees marriage as a necessity where one “measures the odds” and “adapt oneself to consequence” (49). Mahesh's inevitable long absence from home due to his official tours makes Devi lonely. Her father-in-law who is different and unlike Mahesh “listens attentively to her” gives respite from boredom (50). After his death she is engulfed by ennui and withdrawal, creating a suffocating emotional vacuum in her life.

Devi finds herself a victim of a loveless marriage of subservience, a prisoner of time without activity encompassing her life. Hariharan throws ample light on what initiated Devi's loneliness and depression and later her elopement. She is matched with a husband who is unable to fathom the poignancy of her frustration and her needs for emotional compensation are derided. The life pattern at home gets on her nerves. It is pertinent to note here that Devi is not an ordinary girl but is educated abroad. She expects more to life than merely passing her days waiting for her husband from tours. The indifferent attitude of her husband is also quite inappropriate. Childlessness is still a stigma because “being a

wife and becoming a mother are so deeply entwined that a woman who has been married for several years and has not had a child senses the curiosity and concern of others about her childlessness and may feel somewhat odd herself” (Eichenbaum, Orbach 1992:6). Mayamma suffers the orthodox methods used to heal her barren womb where as Devi has to undergo various medical tests. It is synonymous with what Germaine Greer felt “in her late 30's when she desperately wanted a child, she was unable to conceive and turned to expensive medical internations, all of which failed ... her denunciation of elaborate fertility treatments as causing untold “damage” to desperate woman ...” (Gurdev 2001:1). The new generation women educated, vocal, make their career as well as motherhood choices too. Even then it is the woman who faces the blot being considered a 'fertility symbol' and is advised to go in for motherhood (Nabar 1995:100). This at times becomes a frustrating and upsetting experience.

One of the patriarchal beliefs that masculine activities are superior has been instrumental in devaluing women's work. Generally, work implies paid work and hence the domestic work is trivialized. One typical example that can be quoted is that of Mahesh who wonders how Devi could do nothing and pass her time. He laughs when Devi tells him that during his absence she did “nothing.” “Nothing. How do you do nothing?” (55) and adds that he would “pray to be born a woman in my next birth ... Then I won't have to make a living at all” (54).

For an Indian woman her role is circumscribed within the emotive emersion of herself which results in the negation of self and often leads to exploitation and conflict. Often bogged down by their effort to maintain affiliations, to avoid ostracization, some like Mayamma surrender complacently disregarding their psychological pain and suffering. Now and

then they voice their protests but do not openly rebel like the new generation women like Devi.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Hariharan uses Baba and Devi's grandmother as mouthpieces to initiate Devi into the lore of an ideal archetypal woman. But Hariharan is an astute artist. She makes a deft distinction between Baba's stories and Grandmother's stories and conveys her message adroitly. While Baba's tales are for Devi as a wife, grandmother's fascinating stories have a deeper import. It is Union significant to note that the grandmother chooses to recount the stories of women who are not the stereotype females: submissive, self-sacrificing and subdued. Her women are self-directed heroines who have shown their courage in countering the hegemonic discourse—Gandhari blindfolds herself as a mark of protest, Amba avenges herself on her offenders, Mansa has the power to retrieve her husband from the snakeskin and Damayanti has the courage to openly choose her husband. The grandmother has seen life's vagaries. She knows the price a woman has to pay for deviating from the given line. That is why she does unduly criticise the myths, but then she does not uphold the system. Her answers to Devi's questions have many meanings and when time comes Devi chooses the answer that best suits her purpose. Re-living the stories in retrospect, she understands her implications for her situation and becomes self-directed.

III

The feeling of rebellion or resistance required for validating the 'self,' however, is often stifled by the dominating society or by the pressure of the circumstances. The ex-chairperson for National Commission for Women, Mohini Giri states: “The bitter experience of the National Commission for women especially in the last five to six years, has been that whenever a woman wanted to break her silence and speak out, she has been brutally

silenced” (1998:IV). A woman's sense of her gender, sexuality and her body forms a prominent place in her conception of her 'self.'

Women psychologists opine that when a woman learns to take care and nurture not out of the fear of society but out of their free will, they are ready to take responsibility of their own 'self' this is the point when they achieve self-validation. Self-validation cannot be achieved in isolation. It is in the community and in their relation with the community that women learn to assume their 'voice,' to listen to themselves and empower themselves. But once they understand the boundaries of the 'self and the influence of the social condition much of their tension evaporates. When the characters transcend their objectification and see themselves as subjects, they refuse to be contained within the spaces traditionally coded as female, domestic and normative. Our culture has tremendous potential to combat reactionary and anti-women forces. The novelist studied here use the cultural material creatively and tries to purge the harmful traditions. The protagonists Sita and Devi are not alienated from their culture; they are in the process of forging a link with their inner being and in doing so are protesting against the limitations of women's lives. The novelist, by indicting the limitations imposed on women's lives and empowering them to assume responsibility for the self are universalizing women's condition and constructing a self-aware female who does not suffer stoically or wallows in self-pity but one who strives to resolve the seminal questions of identity, self-worth and self-directedness. The novelist draws from local and cultural myths and legends and from contemporary social situation. By intertwining these into the texture of the novels she evaluates the cultural paradigms and allows her characters to participate in the creation of their present so that they are not trapped in the repetition of the past.

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