

Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*: A Replica of Indian Heritage

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ABSTRACT

English is taught as a second language in India. The learners may have difficulty in acquiring the basic skills of the language, since they may not have sufficient exposure to the language. In a multilingual country like India where twenty-two languages are approved by our constitution as the national languages, English is used as a tool in unifying the feelings of our people. So, our learners need to acquire language skills in English. Language skills may be imparted to the learners when it is coupled with a material that is familiar. When the glory of our culture is dealt with in fiction, the learners may understand the sentence structure, word order, and vocabulary. For fulfilling this purpose, fiction is the finest vehicle to transmit the culture. In India, people are aware of their culture, though they live in a busy world. This paper analyses how Githa Hariharan, the Indo-Anglican fiction writer uses the genre of fiction as a medium to transmit the culture to learners by exhibiting the Indian myths in a detailed manner to correlate the contemporary life of our people. In the story, Indian myths are intermingled with the lives of Indian women. Githa Hariharan has represented the glory of India through her fiction. In simple words, her fiction; *A Thousand Faces of Night* is the commemoration of Indian Mythology.

KEYWORDS

Gita Hariharan; Indian Heritage; Indian Myth.

India is the cradle of civilization with great tradition and heritage. The ethnicity of this country is prolific with a lot of myths. Though there are many religions and linguistic variations, all people live in harmony. From this land, the rest of the world learns unity in diversity. We have great saints and Rishis in our land who taught their people the art of living.

We have a rich heritage of literary tradition. We have produced great epics of the world, i.e., *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which invariably preach the principles of life to the people.

The English language which we inherited as a result of the colonization by the British has been used as a vehicle for conveying our way of life to the

westerners. This genre is known as Indian Writing in English that has great writers like Radhakrishnan, Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K Narayan, etc. These stalwarts used Indian English fiction as a powerful tool to create awareness among people and also to universalize our ethnic culture. While Gandhi was involved in bringing political revolution, these writers joined hands in bringing social revolution. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, and Tagore's *Chandalika* expressed the social evils and pointed out the necessity of eradicating them.

The tradition continued in imparting our culture and interpreting the myths of our country. The women writers concentrated on the portrayal of different facets of women. The writers are highly educated and experienced enough to focus on the status of women in Indian society. They talk about contemporary women's problems in love, sex, and marriage with greater confidence. Githa Hariharan articulates these themes with the help of Indian mythology. She presents the Indian myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabharata and relates them to the women characters of her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Through this novel, she has won an outstanding place in Indian Writing in English.

The term 'Myth', used in English is derived from the Greek word 'Mythos' meaning 'Word' or 'Speech'. It is a system of

Hereditary stories which were once 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. (Abrams 170).

In the Indian traditional family system, these myths have unique importance as they are verbally and orally transmitted from one generation to another generation to "establish the

sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (Abrams 170). Indian Mythology is connected with the stories about goddesses and even the legendary heroes mentioned in the epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The myth collections are called Puranas. Githa Hariharan, being brought up in a traditional Hindu family might have been acquainted with all these myths and she perfectly blended the myth and reality in modern Indian life.

The story of *The Thousand Faces of Night* revolves around three women Characters--Devi, the central character; Sita, her mother, and Mayamma, the caretaker cum cook. Githa Hariharan deftly explores the prescription of gender relations through Indian mythology. The stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damayanthi, and others reflect on the life of these characters in the novel. The novel establishes the relationships which originate out of the emotional needs of human beings coming into contact with one another. As a young girl, Devi inquisitively tries to know the mystery of life. During her childhood, her grandmother told her several stories. Everyone gains knowledge as Sigmund Freud says:

Widely different sources, from fairy tales and myths, jokes, and witticisms, from folklore . . . saying and songs of different people and from poetic and colloquial usage of language (Freud 166).

Indian mothers train, protect and guide their daughters in all their endeavours. With their mother's guidance and emotional support, they internalize their femininity. "She was always our anchor rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of our existence" (16). To make her only daughter, Devi, settle down, Sita decides to call her back from America. Having arrived in India, she realises that her mother is going to arrange her

marriage through swayamvara. In the Indian social setup, marriage is considered a traditional role for women. Though Devi is not interested to marry, she accepts the proposal because she does not want to hurt the feelings of her mother. The mother “weaves a cocoon a secure womb” (13). At this point, Devi recollects her grandmother’s story of Damayanthi which was taken from the Mahabharata. Nala, the king of Nishad was brave, handsome, and virtuous. Damyanthi’s father decided to hold her swayamvara. Damayanthi was brave and determined to espouse Nala. So, she threw the garland around his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the gods. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral, “A woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning” (20). The story of Nala-Damayanthi fascinated her. From this story, Devi established the concept of Swayamvara.

The next story narrated by her grandma is about Gandhari who plays a significant part in the *Mahabharata*. Gandhari was married to a very rich prince, whose Palace was “twice as big twice as magnificent as her parent’s Palace” (28) and “the Marble Pillars Shone like Mirrors” (28), whereas on meeting her husband for the first time in such a rich palace, she was taken aback for “The White eyes the pupils glazed and useless” (29). Gandhari in anger vowed never to see again the world; so, she bound her eyes with the help of a veil. Summing up the story Devi’s grandmother says: “she embraced her destiny--a blind husband with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (29). Through this story Devi learnt life through her grandmother’s choice of Gandhari and acclaims:

The lesson brought me five steps close 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. (29)

Gandhari’s story is once again reflected in the life of Sita, Devi’s mother. Before marriage, her parents taught her to play the Veena. She entered her husband’s house with a veena as part of her dowry. After completing the household affairs, which was considered the foremost duty of the housewives, she used to play Veena. One day her father-in-law called her for performing some work before the morning puja. She could not hear, as she was playing the Veena. The father-in-law scolded Sita. “Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (30). In a wave of momentary anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play the veena again, and replied in a whisper: “yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law” (30).

Another significant story told her by her grandma deals with a beautiful girl who married a snake. Although Devi’s immature mind cannot decode the real purpose underlying the story, it is etched in her memory as a story throughout her life. A childless couple prays to God for a child and in return, a snake is born to them. When the snake grew up, the parents planned a marriage. He walked to the distant lands in search of a bride. When the host learns that he is in search of a girl for his venom-tongued son who is in the shape of a snake, he readily offered his gorgeous daughter. The girl on seeing the snake as her husband, whole-heartedly accepted her lot, saying “A girl is given only once in Marriage” (33). One night the serpent came into her room and spent a night with her. The next morning when she woke up, surprisingly she found a handsome young man on her bed. The story delineates the Hindu concept of rebirth. Devi co-relates the story with the lot of the servant maid, Gauri.

As the grandmother grew older, stories also took a new shape. “The

grandmother's stories became the sharper, more precarious tone of dangerous possibilities" (35). This time grandmother dwells upon Mahabharata for a story and she talks about Amba. Prince Bheesma goes to a swayamvara of three beautiful princesses: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Amba the eldest chose King Salwa and garlanded him. But suddenly Bheesma kidnapped all the three princesses and took them to his stepmother. When they came to know that Amba had already married, they let her go to King Salwa. Unfortunately, Salwa refused to accept her and insulted her:

Do you think I feast on Left overs? I am a king. I do not touch what another man won in battle. Go to Bheesma. He won you when his arrow struck my Eager hard on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me? (37)

Insulted Amba goes back to Bheesma, who also refused to accept her. As a result, she changed her attitude towards life and vowed to avenge Bheesma. She went to the forest and undertook a penance, meditating on Lord Shiva. Having been pleased with her penance, Lord Shiva gave her a garland and promised her, "Who so ever wears this garland will surely kill Bheesma" (39). This story reared a brave attitude in Devi. "She day-dreamed more and more about female avengers" (40). These lessons indelibly imprint themselves in her mind. She confesses, "I lived a secret life of my own; I became a woman Warriors, a heroine, I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut of the evil magical demon's heads" (41).

The most interesting story which has a message about motherhood is about Ganga and Shantanu. She says "Motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast" (88). On walking along the bank of the Ganges, King Shantanu happened to meet a

beautiful damsel. He fell in love with her and in turn, she had promised to marry him, provided he did not question her actions. However difficult the condition was the king accepted it. No sooner did she give birth to her first child than she killed it by drowning the child in the river Ganges. She killed all her seven children successively. Shantanu could not approve of such conduct but remained silent because he promised her. Upon the birth of the eighth child, he could not refrain from protesting against her action. The damsel, that is his queen goes back to her original form as the river Ganges, saying, "Then take him be the father and mother to him" (88), and plunges herself into the river. There is a belief in Hindu mythology that the water of the Ganges purifies us of our sins for it flows from heaven. The lady plunged into the river to wash away her sins. After many years Devi could interpret the story and concludes, "To be a goodmother, to be a mother at all . . . you have to renew your wifely vows everyday" (88).

After marrying Mahesh, Devi meets her father-in-law, Baba, and the caretaker-cum-cook in that home, Mayamma. The emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba. Her relationship with Baba becomes stronger. He was a Sanskrit professor, an intellectual man. He narrates some stories about womanhood and the wifely vows and duties in a household. Devi compares his stories with that of her granny. She avers, "her stories are a prelude to my womanhood an initiation into it subterranean possibilities" (51). While analysing Baba's stories Devi says, "Always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife". (51).

Baba talks about Manu, who is the creator of the Hindu code of conduct. He teaches Devi what Brahminhood is. He tells Devi quoting from Manu, "A Brahmin . . . shrinks from honors as from poison; humility he covets as if it is nectar" (52).

Baba dwells deeply in the Vedas and Sanskrit hymns. Devi feels glad to be a disciple of such an intellectual man.

The Indian tradition of music is deep-rooted and has an ancient origin. It reflects our heritage. The study of music exposes the hitherto forgotten aspects of Indian tradition. We are the creators of the two principal forms of music--Hindustani which is popular in North India and Carnatic, which is popular in South India. Baba used to hear the Carnatic music. He talks about the Ragas and Kriti with Devi. He narrates the life history of Muthswamy Dhikshidhar, one of the greatest composers of Carnatic music. The entire episode is the novelist, Gita Hariharan's tribute to Muthuswamy Dhikshidhar and Carnatic music.

Not only does he narrate about Muthuswamy Dhikshidhar, but also narrates about Jeyadeva who brought out Gita Govinda, a composition on "Krishna's all-encompassing love" (65). He also talked about his resolution to lead a simple and austere life. Purandara Dasa was a memorable composer of Karnataka. Baba through his stories and incidents from the history of India reiterates: "Non-Violence, truthfulness, honesty, Purity, control of the senses--this, in brief, is the dharma of all the four castes" (66).

Githa Hariharan selected the less prominent figures from the Indian epics and Puranas. She talks about Gandhari, and Amba who are less known to the contemporary learners instead of talking about Sita and Savithri. She talks about Indian myths which are forgotten by many of us in the era of globalization and liberalization. Our sophisticated lives made us renounce our heritage. On the whole, this novel is a retelling of the past. Thus, through her narrative, she turns her work into the act of restoration--restoration of lost Indian tradition.

In her novel, Githa Hariharan not only Indianised the incidents but also nativized the use of the language. She abundantly uses Indian words like Agraharam, Ashtapadi, Nadaswaram. Nagaligapushpa, and so on. She takes the Indian culture to the western readers of the English-speaking countries through her chosen Indian vocabulary.

Through teaching literature, the culture of any country is passed on to the younger generations. The cultural shock might cause resistance and hurdle for anyone who wants to pursue literary work that is based on the literature hailing from a foreign culture. For instance, reading D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Indian learners were embarrassed by the author's representation of the mother-son relationship and found it difficult to absorb the unnatural, irrational relationship. But the Indian learners could appreciate the writings of Indian authors such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, and other similar novels. They can learn more vocabulary and structure if the work is replete with their culture and tradition.

English is more Indianised by these writers. An Indian expression like 'They are not blessed with a child' is accepted instead of the regular English structure 'They have no child'. Concerning the consideration of vocabulary; English has imbibed so many words from Indian languages like 'catamaran' and 'decoction' which find their place in the Oxford English Dictionary. So, the use of these words and sentence structures in Indian English fiction may assist an Indian learner to enrich his use of the English language. Githa Hariharan has added to this repertoire of knowledge through her mythological references in her novel.

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