

Treatment of Indian Women in Githa Hariharan's Novels

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While discerning the causes for the subordination of women and the means to empower them, the concepts of identity and freedom are taken into consideration. An identity for any one is determined traditionally by the status of the individual in a social structure, especially in family and marriage for a woman. According to the traditional moral code, family and marriage are constituted as the essential institutions of society in which man 'naturally' occupies the spheres of work and world and the social identity of a woman is obliterated since she is the silent, unpaid, domestic guardian. Freedom which allows one to have an openness of experience has been curtailed to a woman and she has been imprisoned in kitchens, parlours and behind the veils of 'purdah' and ultimately, she has been made dependent on the male. In this way inequality of sexes has been created through exclusion, denial of access to learning, thinking and expression.

Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity and their emergence into independent individuals. She tries to make the women characters aware of their own existence as real human beings and realize that real freedom to them is not only throwing away every form of dependence, slavery and acceptance, but also freedom from their own internal prejudices and freedom to dismantle their own traditional thought structures. In fact, in her literary world Githa Hariharan provides space and freedom for

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her characters in order to exhibit the world as envisioned by Tagore in *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*:

Where the mind is without fear

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost
its way

In to the dreary desert sand of dead habit

.....

Where the mind is led forward by Thee into

Ever – widening thought and action –

Into that heaven of freedom

My father let my country awake. (poem 35, 27)

As a result, the novels of Githa Hariharan pave way for deconditioning their traditional thought structures to enhance a new way of thinking. As they transcend the chains of bondage, they start reflecting and get transformed in the process. Thus, they are made the principal agents of change with a distinctive individuality to create a new culture – culture of equality and equity and “alternative possibilities which are androgynous and which are an acknowledgement of the presence of feminine within the large social discourse” comments Jasbir Jain in her article “Men in the Minds of Women” (58).

The ideal of motherhood which seems to have consumed heavy power hides the irony of social reality. In reality, mothers experience helplessness, choicelessness and a compulsion to make a virtue of necessity. All feminine characteristics of patience, self-sacrifice, love and care that construct and support the cult of true womanhood result from and foster the essential image of ideal motherhood. Today, women have started viewing motherhood as less central to their identities. According to Friedan,

Motherhood, the ultimate aim of traditional femininity, is a primary component of that problem that has no name.... Audre Lorde, rather than positioning mothers as long suffering victims, suggests that motherhood also can be viewed as an avenue to change power. (169)

In the portrayal of Sita, the researcher views Githa Hariharan on the radical feminist path. Motherhood which is conceptualized as the most valuable objective in a woman's life is approached in a new angle in the character of Sita in *The Thousand Faces of Night* that endows her with an understanding of self, creative flexibility and agentive strength. Though Sita is delineated as the one who has internalized myth of a mother, ultimately is shown as the one with the emerging individualism who yearns for fresh 'spaces'. Sita tries to live up to the expectations of the society, conform to social standards and comply with the idea of a woman being virtuous and good though she is aware of the opinion and injustice that is amply fore grounded in the society. However, at last, she realizes that even with their complete submission and self-obliteration, they do not escape the imposed rigours of the society on women. She feels that she has been crippled by the firm grip of degenerated traditions and even motherhood like all other social institutions, traps her into retardation of self-growth and mental enlargement.

For a mother, her ability to produce children is the only evidence of her femininity. A childless woman is a stigmatized outcast and is of no use to society. She is inauspicious and a waste and therefore downgraded to a life of servility. To draw attention to the sufferings of a childless woman in a patriarchal society the novelist portrays the life of Mayamma and Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* with scrupulous attention. When Mayamma has lost her first baby "conceived after ten years of

longing and fear” (‘Prelude’, TFN) the doctor and the mother-in-law scold her, unmindful of her physical pain saying, “the barren witch has killed my grandson” (‘Prelude’, TFN). Devi, in the modern era too, experiences the same kind of mechanical treatment. Only the tools are modern; suffering is the same.

Devi says, “I stood dumb; overwhelmed by this official reference to my sex life...I seem to have lost...my sense of humour, even my girlish ability to giggle” (TFN 91). Her inability to conceive, “the easiest of accidents” (TFN 91) made her realize her nonentity in a row of proud pregnant women,” when a nurse comments, “look at the obedient, dutiful wives around you... They are born wives, they don’t need others to regulate their functions and coax them to grow in the right direction” (TFN 91-92). This brings one to an unfortunate predicament which all women suffer in spite of the sophistication of the twentieth century. An America returned Devi suffers the same humiliation that Mayamma an illiterate, ignorant village woman did a few decades ago. The only change is that modern women are humiliated through modern technology – “smear”, “injection” and fertility center. That Mayamma was forced to suffer is vivid from the lines, “Smear the burning red, freshly ground spices into my barrenness” (TFN 113), “...next time it was my breast. Cut the right one open, here, take this blade. Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam” (TFN 113), “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” (TFN 114). Mayamma or Devi - a childless woman loses her right to rule the home. And at such critical moments neglect from husband drives Devi to desperation.

Besides strongly projecting the silently suffering, sacrificial role of the devoted wife, the novelist is underlining their potentiality for freedom of thought and action also. Women of three different generations however commence to grow as the novel develops from a point of initial meekness, fragility and submission to cognition of self-worth, self-fulfillment and self-identity. They assume basic freedom from the necessity of conformation with predefined cultural constructs. They choose to dismantle relationships that are deadening for the sake of change and growth which they recognize as vital elements of dynamic existence. As a result, they emerge as freed individuals daring, defiant with enough self assurance to seek their own fulfillment by themselves as explicated in the previous chapter.

Meena in the novel *In Times of Siege* could be named as a 'female hero' who is aware of herself as an individual. She is free from her traditional, social and moral constructions and is able to live with a heightened sense of dignity and individuality. She avails the opportunities provided by education, enfranchisement and employment. In a nutshell, she is a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual. She is a person who is sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive. She asserts her own personality and insists upon her own rights as a woman. She becomes a quester and is able to take responsibility of her own 'self' as she processes the psychological strength to stand on her own. The main charm of Meena lies in her independence and her ardent desire to combat with such situations. As an empowered individual, she is able to decide about personal and collective circumstances. She enthusiastically takes up Murthy's cause, and is of great help in organizing the steps to be taken by him at his point of crisis. She does not mould herself on anyone else's concept but determines and shapes her life on her own. She believes as Rosamund in Margaret

Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) dependence to be a sin. Thus, Githa Hariharan presents Meena as a liberated woman who is aware of the choices open to her. This awareness frees her from the compulsiveness of playing traditional role and at the same time awakens her to the complexity of living and loving. She marches on the path to become fully human, to face the hardness of her life with strength and hope, to substitute fearful compliance with conscious choice and to shatter the internal victimization by learning self-acceptance.

As commented by Jasbir Jain, the novels of Githa Hariharan "not only picture the simple confrontation between tradition and modernity but also question the moribund attitudes towards institutional practices and uses of both power and knowledge", opines Jasbir Jain in her article "Men in the Minds of Women" (54). Githa Hariharan proves through her women protagonists that a woman should be aware of her 'self', and be self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood as stressed by Nahal as "a meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense" (17). Thus, a new breed of powerful, self-aware, confident and autonomous female characters emerge to occupy the prime position in her novels. Though Devi's marital status contracts her power, the novelist has allowed her to establish her self-identity and self-ownership by liberating her from the false grandeur of the male constructed gender roles. Devi's life thus becomes the story of quest, education and liberation as she manipulates to liberate her from the bondages of emotional thralldom. Sita, Parvathi and all the women characters in the novel have proved that silence is a device to acknowledge the power the women wield despite their disadvantaged social status across time and space. Their inner

strength determines their woman–power to overcome all obstacles.

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