

Literature - A True Custodian of the Ethicality: Unveiling the Discrimination, Oppression and ...
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Literature - A True Custodian of the Ethicality: Unveiling the Discrimination, Oppression and Exploitation of the Marginalized Ones in Indian Society through Fiction

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Abstract

*Fiction has ever since been a powerful and authentic mode of literary art to expose the vices and follies of society. A realistic human world has to genuinely reflect various facets of a society and can't indeed afford to ignore even a hue of it, howsoever bizarre it may be; for good and evil do co-exist. To be a member of a group of society that has been marginalized for a long time is surely 'disadvantageous'; and, when one belongs to two or three of such groups simultaneously, as in the case of a poor Dalit woman in India or a poor African-American woman in the US, things obviously get doubly difficult. The present research article aims to critically examine and explore the typical stratum of Indian society wherein a woman is forced to bear the brazen act of oppression and exploitation, unquestioned and unregistered; constantly by three generations without a single ray of hope for relief or reprieve from any corner; and, the very ambit of examination revolves around the three typical characters: Mayamma's mother-in-law, her husband, and, her son, hailing from three consecutive generations in Githa Hraiharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*.*

Keywords

Craftsmanship, art, oppression, exploitation, sensibility.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

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*Literature - A True Custodian
of the Ethicality: Unveiling
the Discrimination,
Oppression and ...*

Notions Dec 2023,
Vol. XIV, No. 2,
pp. 44 - 55
Article No. 7

Online available at :
[https://anubooks.com/journal/
notions](https://anubooks.com/journal/notions)

Introduction

Portraying a true picture of society ought to be the prime objective of an artist. Literature has, since ages, been the pan mirror to reflect, fix, expose, and reform the follies and vices of society; and no creative writer can justify his talent/duty without having given a shot to this reforming zeal. One of the features of true art, as it goes without saying, is ‘permanence’; and a piece of creative writing acquires this status only when it seeks to portray contemporary society in its true colours; and, in turn, aims to reform its follies. That is why works like *Canterbury Tales*, *Hard Times*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have a perennial taste and universal appeal. Many practitioners of literary art have sought to target various social/ political discrimination: the act of ‘marginalization’ amounting to ‘oppression’ and ‘exploitation’ being ones, and on the top of them. Such oppression could obviously be seen as the typical product of ‘social constructs’ – the rich oppressing the poor; the man oppressing a woman; the white oppressing a black – and so on; and no true literature can indeed afford to ignore such exposure.

Since a good piece of literary art ought to represent a society in its true colours, its characters need to be picked up authentically from every sphere of life. An astute observer of practical life, Githa Hariharan aims not only at portraying her characters well, but also maintaining due representation from various social strata. Having commenced once, the reader thus finds himself gliding through her fiction effortlessly as, by virtue of her ‘prime sensibility’ and ‘astute craftsmanship’, she keeps on instituting a wonderful range of characters throbbing with unique traits so as to urge and tease its readers long after they had felt and enjoyed their presence. Such a vital exercise does, nevertheless, reflect her deep knowledge about human behavior and social practices. In her fiction, if we find innocent and submissive characters full of simplicity and good human values, we also find the ones who lack due sensitivity. The forthcoming pages will thus examine as to how, by means of certain social constructs, Mayamma, a woman from the lower middle class in India, becomes a victim of social oppression continually by three generations represented by her mother-in-law, her husband, and her son respectively. The portrayal of members of such a world, and the novelist’s wonderful control over their interactions and altercations, thus deserves special examination.

a) **Mayamma’s Mother-in-law**

Mayamma’s mother-in-law in *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a typical social class through whose characterization a very genuine facet of society is brought out by Githa Hariharan. She thus deserves first place in such an examination. That a woman, when in power/position, may become hostile to another

woman, forgetting her own days of pain and misery has been brought home by Hariharan through vivid characterisation and skillful blending of dialogue. As the story begins, before even finalizing the marriage proposal with her son, she would leave no stone unturned in examining her would-be daughter-in-law (Mayamma). As a part of such an astute examination, she took her aside and thoroughly cross-questioned about the genuineness of jewelry she was wearing. She quickly “tugged at Mayamma’s long, thick (gold) plait to make sure it was all real”, and enquired if “they were hers or her sister’s” (Hariharan 80). However, unable to check Mayamma’s inside, she relied on the astrologer’s prediction that she would bear many sons. Having satisfied with such astrological foretelling, she now concentrates on spurning the maximum wealth her daughter-in-law would bring with her as a dowry.

Her frivolous nature, however, soon surfaces as, by the end of the first year itself, she finds her daughter-in-law useless and intolerable – the one who remained without a single sign of pregnancy even after sleeping with her husband for the whole year. Concerned keenly about her only and prime intent to get a grandson in the house at the earliest, she harbours all around - determined to pursue her daughter-in-law all along her ruthless course of vows and penance. She watched her ‘slim waist’ intently for the first year; and broke into complaint: “What kind of girl is this? She eats as much as anybody else, but is barren.” (ibid) It now takes no time to make her suspect the signs of luck on her daughter-in-law’s horoscope: “Her horoscope is a lie; she will have to do penance to change its course.”(ibid) She is thus hailed to be a typical representative of self-centered and perhaps short-sighted women in Indian society who consider their daughters-in-laws responsible for not getting conceived and bringing a son into the family. It was thus imperative on her part to get impatient with her daughter-in-law: “tear her new sari” and “give her yesterday’s rice to eat” for there was no “use in feeding a barren woman?” (112) On another occasion, when she finds Mayamma admiring her new sari, she bluntly rebukes her: “What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch?”(113) Her insensitivity is further pen-pictured and rolled out when Mayamma recounts her own experience:

“She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night and smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my barrenness. I burned; my thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails. The next time it was my breast. Cut the right one open, here, take this blade ... and bathe the lingam” (113)

It is clear that she wanted a grandson; and the very course of action followed no reason but only her typical whims and caprice. One is completely shocked over

her orders for her daughter-in-law whereby she asks her to cut her breast open with the blade, and “take the silver cup with blood . . . bathe the lingam” (ibid) to propitiate the gods. Just like a self-styled dietitian, she charts out a well calculated course of action to be observed by Mayamma:

“No, no Maya. No rice for you today. It is 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.” (114)

She, however, does never falter in showcasing her artificial and frivolous gestures of goodness that eventually speak only of her hypocrisy and false pretense. Every night Mayamma had to “sit at her feet massaging her fleshy ankles”; and it was not before “close to midnight” when she would wake up and say, “You can go upstairs now . . . you are young, you will want to go to him.” (116)

Throughout the course of the plot, one would never fail to make out her contemptuous and superficial concerns. Though she is fiercely determined to force Mayamma to undertake an inhuman course of so-called penance, she appears to be least concerned if her own son “sneaks in towards dawn, satiated with his carnal night in the fields” (118) only to hit his wife like an animal; and if her grandson “hits her (Mayamma) with an iron frying pan” and snatches her earrings. It was thus not surprising if Mayamma, who looked like a divine Lakshmi when she entered her mother-in-law’s house, was just tuning herself to the requirements of the house:

“I put away the shells, the smooth, round pebbles I had played with in my parents’ home. I took in my hands the iron skillet and blew the fire into the stove even before my mother-in-law woke up. I cooked so many hungry mouths . . . see, the fine grains of fifth live on in my finger nails.” (116)

The irony of fate can be vividly witnessed when this mother-in-law is seen holding Mayamma solely responsible for bringing a curse on her household for, one fine day, her husband disappears, taking with him all the money in the house, never to return despite the good signs of luck in her horoscope. Unreason and irrationality made this old lady shriek in agony; and we soon find her “taking away the wooden idol of the family god to her own room” for, in her opinion, it stood to be “defiled . . . by Mayamma’s years of unstinting prayer.”(81)

As the story goes, we learn that it was over ten years of rigorous penance when the goddess blessed Mayamma’s womb; and the seed ripened. Her frivolous pride could be easily seen as if her prescribed course of diet and penance had acquired a universal sanctity – as a testifying concoction for a woman to conceive. She now appears to count herself as an astute coach whose formulae finally hail his trainees

to qualify for the Olympics. This is again how Mayamma recounts her mother-in-law's reaction and course of action sooner she conceived:

“Now my arch enemy, my mother-in-law, bustled around with purpose, her eyes filled with the power of her witch weapons. She ground sharp, needle-like, green chilies and threw the paste into the oil bubbling on the fire. Every time I left the house and came back, she hovered at the doorstep, broom in hand...hit the tip of the broom, and as the dusty sticks crackled, a beautiful smile of revenge slipped across her face.” (122)

The orthodox and irrational notions nurtured an invulnerable wall around her own psyche beyond which Mayamma's mother-in-law could rarely peep out. She was quick to hold a purification ceremony in the house sooner the poor thing (the infant) died during the delivery. She, however, “knew no ritual”, observes the novelist, “to purify the stench of the vomit that flew out of (her son's) mouth after three days of toddy and lovemaking in the fields.” (120) One cannot ignore the way she vented out her undue grudges just before her death. Grasping Mayamma's hand she, “stared in her eyes”, and came out with all that perhaps remained buried within her: “You ill-starred slut, you have brought all this upon my household,” (ibid) and eventually died “whimpering about the curse Mayamma had brought upon her household.” (81)

Hariharan, through this character, thus robustly portrays that orthodox and atrocious sect of Indian women who carry on whimsically throughout their life. They typically represent the very stratum of society that stays away from reason and rationale, and lead a life beyond contentment.

b) Mayamma's Husband

Mayamma's husband in *The Thousand Faces of Night* hurls as a typical representative of that stratum of irresponsible and unreasonable men in Indian society who are good-for-nothing. A husband is expected to fill every cranny of his wife's (specifically that of a newly wedded one) life with happiness. But this man proves to be a living fun for her fate. Through this character, Hariharan attempts to expose the very chunk of men in Indian society that continue exploiting women. The criminal axe in the hands of such people does acquire double edges, not only because the scene and sketch of such crime remain enclosed and encompassed within their own houses, but also because they find themselves shielded against the clutches of the law as their victims, being miles away from constitutional and legal remedial access, often choose to remain silent. Women, in Indian society, marry these kinds of men for sheer insult.

Having taken seven steps with Mayamma, this man finds it his sole right to urge her to be his inseparable companion. There, however, remains least doubt about his very intent and motive behind marriage when, soon after tying the knot, he is noticed pursuing his wife “to let their common path be lit by their lustrous love...so that (they) may bear a son.” (80) Though he makes due vows “to unite their minds with the same thoughts” and calls her “the lady of sweet-edged words” (ibid), in real life, we find him to be an utter failure in keeping his words. All his promises, however, soon turn out to be sheer myth as, with every passing day, he grows insensitive to his wife’s expectations. The hyper irony of his love and hypocritical vows is unveiled shortly for the love he wants to make is revealed to be lustrous, and his prime expectation from his wife is to merely get a son. The moral conduct of such an individual could easily be fore-grounded when, even during that tender stage (of a pupil), he is not only found bunking the classes but, more alarmingly, when we notice “his eyes turning sly when they rested on a woman’s back, bent over her work.” (80) Subsequently, he is even noticed running away from the school for gambling.

As the story goes, he is found to be whoring in the fields soon after his marriage. He forgets all his vows and promises to unite his heart with that of his wife, and did show least concern towards drudgery she was subjected to by his mother. While Mayamma was kept downstairs late at night by her mother-in-law, he often wandered in the fields to satiate his sexual urges. The thought of his utter insensitivity would eventually force her “to run up the staircase to a deafening silence” for “he would sneak in towards dawn, satiated with his carnal night in the fields, and draw (her) to himself with rough tenderness.” (118) Needless to emphasize there are many Mayammas around us who are forced to live in pathetic situations amidst endless pain and misery inflicted by their husbands. Mayamma’s terrible experience, as a bride, raises serious questions over the meaningfulness of a strong institution like ‘marriage’:

“He snorted like an angry bull. He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow...his grunting frightened me. If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with the other.” (118)

It is not surprising that the ruby and pearl nose-ring that hung over Mayamma’s upper lip, and that made her look quite beautiful, soon found its place off her face for it stood to be a hurdle in his enjoyment. No matter if her husband “pierced his own nose and ears” in many parts of her body, he took no time to force her to take the nose-ring off because “it made it difficult for him to kiss (her).” (110) Every night Mayamma was terribly subjected to sexual assault by him “with his

large heavy rough thighs heaving on her” (ibid). She painfully recalls him calling her a “shameless hussy” (111), and one particular night after coming back at the end of whoring in the rain, “he even kicked her” (ibid). Through this husband-wife relationship, Hariharan has powerfully attempted what Dr Prasanna Sree Sathupati points out, “to project the amount of violence and rape women in Indian Society are subjected to in the name of marriage, and the cause of wife-assault in a society which sees a woman as the property of her husband.” (Sathupati 108)

Hariharan, through this character, has successfully carved the picture of numberless men in Indian society whose wives remain the silent victims of continuous rape in their own houses. She exposes this rape as a form of personal violence, not merely a physical assault and a symbol of the degradation of the psyche, but “a conscious process of intimidation by which men keep all women”, which S. Indira aptly terms “in a state of fear” (Indira 179). Her astute observation and portrayal do tease the so-called civilized world as the “women like Mayamma continue to sacrifice and live a tortured humiliating life because they have no option, no way out ... bleeding within, seeking solace in the routine of life and religious worship, they go on.” (ibid)

Going through Hariharan’s plot, we are eventually forced to ponder over the pathetic situation of many strata of Indian society wherein, we observe that within marriage, the position of a wife is more vulnerable because she is dependent on her husband. That means saying that nurturing even a thought of leaving him not only means instantly losing a house, but also breaking a family; and, more importantly, to admitting to failure. On the other hand, marriage itself, in Indian society, had quite until been empowering the husband legally to have intercourse with his wife, even without her consent, and at the very cost of her health/ emotional sustenance. The recent constitutional laws declaring the forced intercourse with a wife by her husband as ‘rape’ could be termed but just a sigh of relief. Much of the road still needs to be mapped before a lower/middle class Indian woman actually dares to walk out to seek such remedies without risk of losing her hearth and house.

It remains an acknowledged fact that if a woman happens to be unfortunately raped by a stranger, she either kills herself or has to live with those tortuous pangs forever; but “if she is raped by her own husband”, observes aptly Dr. Prasanna Sree Sathupati, “she has to live with the rapist and has to subject herself to being raped repeatedly ... without any hope of reprieve.”(Sathupati 108) The situation in the case of Mayamma and her husband’s relationship is no different. Her fate appears to take a sudden tortuous twist the moment she marries him. Soon after marriage, while his wife keeps on waiting for him during late nights, he is seen whoring in the

fields to satisfy his lust. It is noticed that Mayamma is continuously molested and subjected to forced intercourse by him. To enquire into the hardcore question: if the sacred institution of marriage in Indian society does indeed ensure the safety of a woman's modesty even in her own house (to say nothing of the whole society), we ponder over Dr Sathupati's apt observation:

"A woman has more cause to fear her husband, than an assault by a stranger. It is more difficult to know the extent of violence against wives, since it is probable that many incidents go unrecorded." (ibid)

Needless to say, there is no dearth of men like Mayamma's husband in Indian society who continue with such insensitivity and irresponsibility. In addition, with society unfortunately choosing to be silent, these acts go unrecorded leaving such transgressions only to multiply. Unless society wakes up and takes on its due responsibility, such a graph will continue soaring high, and many Mayammas will continue to be exploited.

c) Mayamma's Son (Raja)

Mayamma's son, Raja, though a fruit of her long penance, does unfortunately hail to carry on his father's lineage only, and proves in no way better than him. As the story begins, we notice that, in order to meet her mother-in-law's expectations (of begetting a son to the family) Mayamma embraces a rigorous course of penance. Giving up every comfort, she sticks to an austere way of living, and resolves to undertake rigorous penance. Every morning she wakes up before dawn, takes a bath, worships, renews her vows, and survives on meager food as the mother-in-law finds no "use in feeding a barren woman" (Hariharan 112).

After having destiny scared away by her over eager pleas, weekly fasts and "silent and humble apology to an impatient mother-in-law", Mayamma's ten years of penance ultimately bore her fruits as she was "blessed with a son on an auspicious day" (ibid). Her joy thus knew no bounds as "the goddess blessed her womb" and "the seed ripened" (122). The situation quite aptly reflects the socio-cultural implications of merely likely-hood of becoming a mother in Indian society, and the special status it confers upon a woman irrespective of her socio-economic conditions. Mayamma cannot contain her feelings once she becomes pregnant:

"I couldn't walk, I had to skip, run...Oh, I was mad with excitement and impatience...I floated around breathlessly awaiting my son to be born after so many years, counted on bleeding fingers." (Hariharan 122)

Needless to emphasize, in Indian society, nothing but motherhood brings a special status to a woman, and categorizes her into a distinct class. That it is neither

the wealth nor the high class status but the ability to become a mother which, by default, bestows a special identity on a woman, remains a brazen truth beyond any doubt. Northrop Fry aptly quotes Sudhir Kakkar in this context: "Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region...an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and an identity that nothing else in her culture can." (Fry 429)

It, however, remains still a matter of serious contemplation if such distinctions labeled by the society do indeed augur well? Does a son in a family necessarily guaranty an all-along happiness? Indeed, the characters like Raja do tease each of us throughout, and pose a serious question as to why and how, merely the thought of bringing a son into the family makes wonderful changes in the behavior of the old matriarchs, like Mayamma's mother-in-law towards the would-be mother? Nothing to surprise if all of sudden we find such women "bustling with purpose" (Hariharan 122) for, to them, mere the thought of a grandson appears to assure the family's name and fame in futurity. The novelist, with this portrayal, does shake all of us out of complacency as to why society has ever been labeling a woman responsible for not bearing children; and, over that, is the notion of a son assuring perpetual happiness simply not bizarre? She continually appears to engage us in answering the riddle posed by K. Damodar Rao who aptly quotes Sudhir Kakkar analyzing the socio-psychological front of Indian society wherein "a woman is always looked down upon if she does not bear children for a long time", and her altered position sooner she acquires status of motherhood for it "provides redemptive factor for a woman and confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can." (Rao 167)

In the present scenario, we find Mayamma undertaking an austere path of penance to propitiate gods to beget a son. She names him Raja, a king; feeds her at her breast for two years, and does everything to "ward off the evil eye that might blink at her hard-earned fortune" (Hariharan 121). Though she herself survives with meager economical means, she does find him the most pious man to teach him the entire vows of a decent pupil. But unfortunately, when he comes to withstand his own senses, he is found to be growing crooked with every passing day. Even feeding on a lavish helping of tenderness and yearning yields nothing much better, for he soon "turns (quite) sour" (81), and, in order to fulfill his whimsical desires, does not even abstain from threatening and forcefully snatching his mother's jewels one by one. By the age of fourteen, he was beating and forcing her to part with her diamond earrings. A little later, he sold her last pair of gold bangles; and the night she refused to give him her diamond earrings, he "hit her with an iron frying pan" (82). And as

she faints amidst “the cloud of pain ...wet, sticky about her head” and falls on the hard cemented floor, she feels “his (Raja’s) rough hands at her ears, grasping, tearing away” (ibid).

Undoubtedly, while going through this portrayal, we are bound to feel sorry for the irony of the situation. Did Raja, who was born after ten years of long penance, bring happiness; or, did he simply stay to be a cause of perpetual sorrow in his mother’s life? The sons like Raja would never even think of the quantum of pain and torture that may have been inflicted upon their mothers psyche in order to bring them to the real world; and the fact that a woman’s “slim waist” simply entails her status of nothing more than a ‘barren’ who is not even supposed to “eat as much as anybody else” (80) is never realized by them. They fail to apprehend that in certain social strata, until a son is born, their mothers’ horoscope continues to be merely ‘a lie’, and over that, the entire responsibility “to do penance to change its course” (ibid) falls solely on their (mothers’) part. Such individuals would perhaps never be able to appreciate as to how much they owe to their mothers who had even to “cut (their) breast open with the blade” and “bathe the lingam” (114) in order to propitiate the gods and to conceive and beget them. The fact that these mothers were not even allowed a full two-square meal to sustain themselves, and had even been strictly instructed to stop “thinking of food”, and to just “think of (their) womb...empty rotting womb and pray” (ibid) needs to be appreciated fairly.

Such portrayals do seriously shake us out of complacency and continually tease us to answer as to why, after all, women like Mayamma long for a son and undertake austere penance in order to conceive?’ Is this all for which they are forced to stay away from rice one day, from vegetables the next and the tamarind the day after? We are completely shaken from within as we find no answers to the brazen question: Is this all, for which the women in Indian society do “accept things with” what Dr. Prasanna Sathupati terms “stoic silence” and “repress (their) agony, but never raises to question the atrocities committed by (their) mother-in-laws” (Sathupati 108). The hardcore question is yet to be answered by all those Rajas in Indian society who simply ignore their parents, eventually leaving them in a sorrow state – the state of isolation and destitution. And there are many Maymmas around us who are forced to simply recount (without any regret or complaint); forget the endless pain inflicted upon their psyche, and carry on: their inner selves ruptured with none to pay heed, even if their hard earned fortune - those painfully conceived seeds – are lost before even coming to actual world:

“Then the blood came...He (the village doctor) shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my blood, my dying son.” (Hariharan 122)

Society indeed can't simply seek to afford such an insensitivity as we observe that soon after this horrifying scene – ‘the miscarriage’ – the village doctor is heard to continue with unjust ease: “she is strong; she will bear many more children” (ibid). Needless to say, until we wake up, these doctors will keep on playing with such meek lives, and the irresponsible sons like Raja will never understand the deafening pain their mothers may have suffered.

Conclusion

The foregoing facts and arguments have clearly shown that the marginalized ones in a society have always been, and are still, oppressed unjustifiably. The ill-effect becomes doubly tortuous when such a weapon does acquire multifarious teeth. Mayamma is continually exploited and oppressed for she is not only a woman, but a woman who is poor and uneducated belonging to the lower middle class in India. There are many Maymmas around us who are punished merely for their ‘barrenness’. Terrible sexual assaults on their psyche add a new gruesome chapter to their lives every day. The recent enactment of a law, in India, that legally categorizes ‘intercourse -without- consent’ by a husband as an ‘act of rape’, could be a just ray of hope but not a remedy. Seeking justice through such a course of law in Indian society still remains to be nothing more than a dream for a poor, illiterate woman dwelling in a remote village over-laden with patriarchal ethos. Until the society wakes up and takes onto its role seriously to question the injustice; starts deconstructing the age-old unjust social constructs; many a Maymmas would keep on sacrificing their lives. Groaning with pain through miscarriages they really know not what to do? Who to complain? The need of the very hour thus necessitates the younger generation to come forward and sensitize against such brazen and psycho-biological ruptures; and, every unjust act amounting to undue exploitation on the part of society, ought to be exposed, unveiled and recorded on the grass-root level.

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