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**To Be or Not to Be a Good Woman? Transitioning from Feminisation to Femalisation
in Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night"**

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Abstract

'Good' and 'Bad' are value terms deriving their significations from cultural perceptions of a people. Far from being neutral in their implications, they can be considered as ideological constructions. In a patriarchal culture, a good woman is a euphemism for one conforming to patriarchy. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* narratives the conflict that the woman protagonist confronts while choosing between to be or not to be a good woman. She resolves the conflict by rejecting the binary, by choosing to be neither. This paper is an attempt to show how Hariharan has made her protagonist transition from the feminine to the female in her evolution through a feminist choice. Hariharan's protagonists strive towards a re-definition of the lives of women, in a struggle against the erasure of their identity by the social apparatus. She has sought to answer such questions as 'How will liberated women be?' and 'How can they be different from the domestic version created by patriarchy?'

Keywords: Patriarchy, binary, feminine, female, feminist choice

Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined. -Toni Morrison

Githa Hariharan's acclaimed novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) may be seen as feminism narratives. It fictionalizes different stages of woman's progress. Elaine Showalter, the noted American feminist critic identifies these stages as 'feminine', 'feminist' and 'female'. To Showalter, the terms 'feminine' (imitative), 'feminist' (protest) and 'female' (self-discovery) denote developmental stages. In general, critics accept the concept of 'feminine' or 'femininity' as denoting lack, negativity, marginality, and absence of meaning. It is also characterized by subservience and modesty. It is the defining trait of who and what a woman is in terms of the overarching patriarchal ideology. 'Feminist' or 'feminism' stands for anger and revolt and is characterized by aggressiveness, competitive spirit and vindictiveness. It seeks to subvert the patriarchal agenda of feminising women treating them as the second sex. 'Female' is the stage which the contemporary feminists want to achieve. At this level, the question

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of identity is resolved and a woman becomes an autonomous whole. Hariharan appears to have modeled her novel on the theory espoused by Showalter. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Mayamma, the old caretaker at Devi's in-laws' house, Sita, Devi's mother and Parvatiamma, Devi's mother-in-law, and Devi, the protagonist herself belong to the different stages of the progress of women from being victims to emerging as victors. They may be categorised in the terms of Elaine Showalter as 'feminine', 'feminist' and 'female'. Tradition, transition and modernity are the three stages that the women in Hariharan's novel represent.

Githa Hariharan belongs to the group of Indian English women writers producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. She is loath to be branded a woman writer as she believes the tag pigeonholes a writer. However, she calls herself a feminist, along with several other things:

...however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. And this goes for both men and women, of course. So ...I am a writer (as opposed to a woman

writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things! (Hariharan, Interview with Arnab Chakladar)

Through her writings she has tried to prove what women would do if they had ever been allowed to have their own way in terms of power and social re-organization. She has sought to answer questions like 'How will liberated women be?' and 'How can they be different from the domestic version created by patriarchy?'

The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the keynotes of the cardinal problem of the conditioning of a girl child. In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could sell as an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. Generally, marriage is projected as a norm and an end all and be all for woman in the society. 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 124). As J.S. Mill points out, "All women are brought up from the very

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earliest in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men, not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others” (Mill 232). What a woman goes through in her journey on the patriarchy-prescribed path, however, does not concern society. The novel foregrounds women’s struggle against the erasure of their identity by the social apparatus.

Female subjectivity being the thematic focus of her novel, Hariharan portrays the changing image of woman in the modern and the postmodern era through her protagonist, Devi. It records the evolution of an Indian woman named Devi against the conservative native mythos which deters and even chokes her growth at every possible juncture of her life. Women in Hariharan’s novels seem to be the personifications of ‘new’ women who have been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions they have carried for ages. Hariharan’s female characters aim at a re-definition of the lives of women, fulfilling the implicit political aim of the author, as she is not merely concerned with documenting reality, but she has used her novels as a medium for the exploration of the new reality and a subtle projection of values, by posing questions, by suggesting re-assessment and re-definition.

In the gallery of women characters portrayed in the novel, we encounter three sets of women, one which submits to the dominant discourse for validation, the

second resisting it through self-inflicted suffering, and the third which favours the inner validation in search of a free self. Mayamma belongs to the first category; Parvatiamma and Sita, to the second while Devi belongs to the third category. Mayamma succumbs to the patriarchal pressures; Sita and Parvatiamma seek to resist it in ways that only strengthens it; Devi sets out to topple the apple cart of patriarchy.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Hariharan brings the binary images of good and bad women, tradition and modernity into play. She tells us the story of five women - Devi, her mother, Sita, her grandmother, Pati, her mother-in-law, Parvatiamma and her care-taker, Mayamma. Patterns of women’s life in a Hindu cultural society can be very well observed in the novel. There are other narratives of women linked with these women. Mythological female characters like Sita, Amba, Gandhari, Ganga, Gauri are also discussed in the novel through the storytelling of Devi’s grandmother- an act she undertakes to prepare her Devi for womanhood. The women in the novel are connected by their quest for identity, unhappy marriages and disgruntled ambitions. These stories of middle and working class women are juxtaposed with the mythological stories of ideal women. And instead of suggesting a way out of the complex situation the mythological stories tend to cross-examine them. However, Devi, the protagonist refuses to follow the

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preaching from mythologies blindly. She deconstructs the moral of these stories and tries to decipher these ‘morals’ from a fresh perspective.

Devi undergoes an identity crisis even after conforming to the norms set by the society. She remains in the throes of the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, dilemma of cultures, western versus eastern, and dilemma of being a good girl versus bad girl. To be or not to be a good girl is the question that haunts her and the agony of identity crisis attains the desired intensity through the use of myths. Hariharan’s novel traces the trajectory of a new Indian woman’s evolution against the backdrop of patriarchal society that legitimizes its authority through the perpetuation of grand myths.

Devi plays the object role of a suave young charmer in Dan’s life, host and home-maker waiting for her husband, Mahesh who comes home as a guest, and a muse for Gopal, the musician. However, she does not see herself completely in any of these roles. She realizes that all the three men in her life- Dan, Mahesh and Gopal have their own identities and she is expected to fuse herself in their identities. The Hindu society in which she is brought up prescribes that in order to be a virtuous woman and a good girl, she merge herself with the identity of the man in her life. She revolts when she becomes aware that men rule the world, in a patriarchal society like India. She also finds that in India, women

are made to follow an anti-woman code of conduct devised by males. With this realization, Devi not only rejects her conventional role but also embarks upon her journey to attaining her individual identity.

The ‘bad girl’ in her starts overpowering. She sets out to examine the myths she has grown up with and questions their relevance. She explores her own self. Her decision of not to having children, by not trying continuously and hysterically to conceive, symbolizes her search for self. Inspired by her mother-in-law who left her husband’s house to lead a religious life, she also leaves her husband’s house with Gopal. However, soon enough, she begins to see her role in Gopal’s life and finds it little more than that of an object. Towards the end of the narrative, Devi realizes that all this while she was trying to be a good girl and was trying to please society. She has been playing a role of the other in lives of three different men. She is frustrated in these roles. She realizes that she, like all other women around her, has spent her life in becoming the virtuous woman or playing the role of the good girl or ideal woman who never existed or who has grown obsolete with the passage of time. She realizes that she will not be able to do justice with herself if she continues to behave like a good girl from the mythologies. She rebels. She decides that she will not fight with her own self anymore and would resolve the conflict in her. She decides to satisfy nobody but

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herself and then onwards does not have any qualms in quashing all myths and becoming a bad girl. And finally comes back to her mother to re-define her individuality.

Devi's decision not to have children can be read as a feminist choice. When she asks Mahesh why he wants children, Mahesh answers because everyone has them. Devi does not want to produce children because everyone is doing so. This is a condition where she tries to overcome the pressure of the society or expectations of femininity by her independent decision. Here, Hariharan shares the perspective of Shulamith Firestone (The Dialectic of Sex, 1970) who believed that women's capacity for reproduction was the source of their oppression. Women should seize control over the means of reproduction in order to eliminate sex class discrimination. This can be achieved through wider access to contraception, sterilization and abortion.

Devi listens to the fables of ideal women protagonists like Gandhari, Parvati, Sita and the snake woman who follow the footsteps of their husbands, and the stories of ferocious women like Kritya and Amba who take their revenge. B. Krishnaiah explains that "these stories provide two paths to women either to obey their husbands like the former protagonists or revolt against them in the event of male domination like the latter examples." (Krishnaiah 49) Devi's grandmother narrates the mythological stories that have initiated her into the numerous subterranean

possibilities of womanhood. The stories are significantly placed after situations that call for mythical clarification so that Devi can derive the desired meaning. These stories become so much a part of her life that Devi thinks she is the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. Marriage to Mahesh and his cold and indifferent behaviour brings an end to the dream-like life of Devi. She has heard many stories of harassment at the hands of husbands, but she is not prepared for this kind of treatment from her husband. Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba and suffers like the snake woman of her grandmother's stories.

Story-telling emerges as a significant trope in Hariharan's narrative. What is noteworthy here is that these stories construct a grand myth of the ideal woman which the unquestioning women look upon as sacrosanct. However, Hariharan, through her novel, has shown it as male conspiracy aimed at the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology. **These myths are a mighty mischief of the male.** Devi does not therefore merely learn the stories, but more importantly, she learns that stories are meant to be revised and retold. Retelling a tale of the past thus turns into an act of restoration, restoration of a lost tradition.

Devi recollects all the tales of the mythical heroines told by her grandmother, making subtle comparison between the profound and awe-inspiring lives of the mythological women and sordid stories of real women around her. Devi says: "In my

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grandmother's mind, the link between her stories and our own lives was a very vital one." (TFN 30) It is the physical, psychological and emotional intimacy that provides the temper and tenor for Devi's initiation into the world of women. Devi's grandmother dwells more on marginal figures like Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who protested against exploitation in their own powerful ways. Amba is a female avenger who transforms her hatred into sweet revenge and glorious triumph. Gandhari hides her anger behind a thick bandage for eyes for marrying a blind man. Her grandmother says:

In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing... her lips straight and thin with fury. Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman ... She embraced her destiny – a blind husband – with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. (TFN 29)

Gandhari's blindfold is her protest against the injustice inflicted on her by getting her married to Dhritrashtra. When the terms of marriage are broken, Ganga drowns her children and walks out of marriage. All these women - Amba, Gandhari and Ganga - represent female determination. Devi sees the parallel

between the lives of mythical figures of female virtue and that of her mother and finds her mother's self-effacement meaningless. She also confesses: "The lesson that was more difficult to digest was human anger: that it could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life"(TFN 29).

From the above analysis of the novel, we can clearly see three distinct ways in which the women characters react to patriarchy. Mayamma succumbs to it in sheer masochism. Sita and Parvatiamma resist it by suffering it, though in diametrically opposite ways, the former getting immersed into her domesticity and the latter running away from it for salvation. The three of them are martyrs of patriarchy who resisted it only by suffering it. In India Patriarchy elevates its victims to the status of martyrs. However, Devi neither succumbs to it nor suffers it. Notwithstanding her early training in conventional womanhood sanctified through myths, Devi sets out to subvert those myths in order to assert her identity. She emerges as an epitome of the changing image of Indian women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women to self-assured, assertive and ambitious women forcing the society to be aware of their demands. She finally leaves behind all male company to come back to her mother, in order to make sense of what it is to be a woman.

Following the trajectory of the narrative, Devi's life may be seen as

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passing through the three phases, feminine, feminist and female. As a young girl she has succumbed to being feminised through the mythical stories of her grandmother. However, as an adult woman in the throes of a patriarchy-ridden family structure, she emerges rebellious and revises those stories and sees a new meaning lurking in them. It is at this juncture that she exercises her feminist choice of transitioning from feminisation to femaliation.

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