

CHAPTER-V

GITHA HARIHARAN: DECOLONIZING THE FEMININE SELF: FOR A STORY OF HER OWN

Together with Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan has also been hailed as one of the women writers producing a body of Indian literature in English that is committed to women's issues. Like those of her predecessors, her writing too can be discussed as representing the intersection between women's individual identity and the identity of the community, two mutually implicated dimensions whose bonds are rather complex. In fact, if the Indian women writers are constructing "narrative mappings of alternative Indias" through their novels and short stories (Chanda, Ho and Mathai, 1997), then Hariharan's contribution in this regard is certainly outstanding. The reader confronts in her novels diverse regional and national problems related to women's issues. Apart from the productive effectivity of "gender" as a tool of critical analysis in a system of power and social mobility, Hariharan's creation of alternative women characters and the design of a plot around their unconventional choices embodies a form of writing closer to sexual-difference theories that look for women's solutions and priorities. What I mean is that feminist writing in general has remained less concerned with identifying the mechanics of local patriarchies than with the search for alternative ideas and projects for women. But one wonders, even if women had ever been allowed to have their way in terms of power and social re-organisation, what would they do? How will liberated women be? In other words, how can she be different from the domestic version created by the particular patriarchy in which she lives? I think this set of theoretical questions is relevant to the last text I am going to address here because The Thousand Faces of Night (1992), which won for Hariharan the Commonwealth Prize for the best first book in 1993, attempts to

answer some of these questions in a very creative and intelligent way. Contrary to the previous novels discussed above, Hariharan's novel is a different kind of text in its self-assertive tone, establishing story telling in women's own tradition as it passes on among them from generation to generation. The connection between sexuality and power is continuously reiterated in the novel.

The novel compels the reader to undergo an enigmatic experience straight from a woman's life, which ferrets out the struggle of every Indian woman in her affiliation with the society and culture for the sake of preserving her feminine identity and hence, truly brings up alive the buried world of Indian women's lives – "where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival" (The Thousand Faces of Night, blurb). The sharper relevance of the whole issue is on universal suffering of women in the subcontinent. Hariharan traces past temporalities at the root of their sufferings and relates them to the parallel instances in the great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahavarata, because it is from them that Indian Hindu women have always drawn their models. The word 'Faces' in the title of the novel exemplifies the multiple existences that Indian women have to suffer to sustain their lives. Devi – the protagonist, her mother, Sita, her mother-in-law, Parvatiamma, her grandmother and her maidservant, Mayamma, are all in the line, epitomising figures to play assigned roles in a patriarchal dispensation.

Hariharan is a conscious experimentalist. She seems to have identified herself with Devi, who is "an uncompromising survival" (9) in order to uphold her feminist concern for the emancipation of women. She is more concerned with Devi's "interior climate, the climate of sensibility" (Thrikha: 1995: 169), and focuses on her being that is vulnerable despite her best efforts.

Unable to adjust with the ambivalent American experience, Devi comes back to Madras to live with her widowed mother, Sita. Not allowing Devi to brood over her experience with Dan in America, Sita tries to settle her down by an arranged marriage to Mahesh, a matter-of-fact, earthy man, who is not concerned with Devi's past. However, in spite of being married to this reasonably 'good' husband, Devi is unable to settle down in her role as a housewife. Her hard-earned education and exposure abroad prove a hurdle, rather than an asset, in the path of tolerance and adjustment in life. She cannot bear Mahesh's indifference to her sensitivity and broods over her neglect and isolation. Though Mayamma tells her that the secret of a successful married life lies in the capacity to endure pain, Devi is not convinced. She strives to preserve her life even when she is told, "A woman fights her battles alone" (36). Through her perspective, we also see the lives of her mother, her mother-in-law, her grand mother and her maidservant interwoven with several myths of Gandhari, Amba, Ambalika and others. In fact, through these parallelisms, Hariharan explores the continuing impact of the age-old myths and lores about the women's roles and models, which may still remain entrenched in the Indian women's psyche, and thus make them vulnerable.

The novel contains a 'Prelude', which throws ample light on what is to be encountered by the reader in the following chapters:

When I once asked my husband's housekeeper, old Mayamma, why she had put up with her life, she laughed till the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks.

'I can see that you are still a child', she said.

'When I lost my first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear, I screamed, for the only time in life, Why?

'The oily, pock-marked village doctor, his hand still dripping with my blood, looked shifty. A woman must learn to bear some pain, he mumbled. What can I do about the sins of your previous birth?

'But my mother-in-law was for more sure of herself. She slapped my cheeks hard, first this then the other. Her fists pummelled my breasts and my still swollen stomach till they had to pull her off my cowering, bleeding body. She shouted, in a rage mixed with fear, "Do you need any more proof that this is not a woman? The barren witch has killed my grandson, and she lies there asking us why!"...

'So be careful, Devi' she chuckled, her mouth sucking in gulps of air like a fish, 'when you next ask a question' (Prelude).

This story of Mayamma is obviously no melodrama or overstatement. She rightly epitomises many a poor wife of the subcontinent – used as producing machine, betrayed and exploited by husband, children and in-laws, and used-up, drained dry, robbed and cheated by everybody around, and then thrown away to rot by herself. The pithy and ironical statements made in this anecdote really bring out the novelist's rebellion against the calm acceptance of the woman's traditional role assigned by the patriarchy. Hariharan, in fact, critically examines, dissects and questions the age-old norms that have held Indian women in perpetual captivity.

In her adolescence Devi had listened to her grandmother's stories, which were drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Their focus was

on women's pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. She listened to her narration of Gandhari, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. They were a prelude to her womanhood, an initiation into subterranean possibilities. Gandhari had blindfolded herself as a subservient wife because her husband was blind. Perhaps the other aspect of Gandhari's blindfold was her protest against an injustice imposed on her (by getting her married to the blind king Dhritarastra). Her mind rebelled against seeing more and more injustices in the rest of her life. Devi draws a poetic equivalent of Gandhari's blindfoldedness with that of her own parents:

In their blinkered world they would always be one, one
leading the other, one hand always in the grip of other (29).

Her mother, as a young daughter-in-law, had protested in Gandhari's fashion. The story told to Devi by her grandmother reads like this:

'Then one day, my husband sat in front of the gods, ready for his morning prayers. He couldn't find a thing he needed. The flowers had not been picked, the floor had not been swept. "Sita", he called, his voice trembling with anger. She did not hear him, but from her room we heard the sound of the Veena in rapturous flight.

'I put down my knife in the kitchen and hurried to her room. But he got there first, and I heard him roar, "Put that Veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?"

'Sita hung her head over the Veena for a minute that seemed to stretch for ages, enveloping us in an unbearable silence. Then she reached for the strings of her precious Veena and pulled them out of the wooden base...

'She looked at my husband, her eyes dry and narrowed, and said in a clear, stinging whisper, "yes, I am a wife, daughter-in-law."

'We never saw her touch the Veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbour praised, and our household never heard the heart rending music again' (30).

Devi finds this self-effacement of her mother meaningless. She expresses her anger in these words:

Gandhari's anger wrapped tightly round her head in a life long blind fold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine (29).

She further 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 blood stream of her life (Ibid).

Devi's relationship with her husband Mahesh is that of a complicated one. Being a Regional Manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpastes, Mahesh believes in managing everything in life as he does for his company. For him, marriage is just a necessary milestone of life. His solicitude is to see that his goods are delivered to his consumers. Even his wife is no better than a customer to him. Hence, he appears as a poor 'Manager' of emotions. His imperceptible nature could never make him a reliable husband. He believes that emotions and intimacy give rise to vulnerability, whereas shrewd and devious moves in life are essential for smooth sailing. Mahesh expects that everything he does in life must bring to him positive results. He is always in grip of his cursory commercial world. He

treats his wife as an object to satisfy his 'organised sexual urge', which engulfs Devi and gives rise to an awesome loneliness. Her existence with Mahesh is like living in a dungeon with hardly any breathing space between the two. Mahesh is unable to provide her stability and security, either physical or verbal. She ponders on their cohabitation:

Who was this man, this husband whose arms I was to lie in every night? Horror stories of perversion, blind bestial lust and impotence frightened me equally (49).

In between his month-long tours, Mahesh starts his "purposeful love-making" because, as he says, "I want to have my baby" (74). But when Devi fails to get pregnant, she has to undergo the torture of humiliating ordeal under the grab of clinical treatment. Mayamma's physical and mental torture at the hands of her husband and in-laws for failing to get pregnant offers a parallel. Devi's mother too coaxes her to have a baby. The memory of her grandmother's tales about motherhood as also her father-in-law's stories contributes its bit. Hence, Devi herself also comes to believe that she needs a baby. In fact, here we find how patriarchal discourses about womanliness become operative in an individual feminine self. Devi is moved by the discourses she has internalised. In fact, a discourse is not simply the imposition of a set of ideas on individuals rather a process of naturalisation of these ideas in them. As Foucault states:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereas discourse can be both instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but

also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault: 1978: 100-101).

Resistance and opposition take shape in Devi also. In fact, being a woman of the new generation, she can have her right realisation before it is too late. When her grandmother says her that “motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of the tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast. A mother has to walk strange and tortuous paths” (88), she rightly realises that she is “unprepared for it” (Ibid). Through her “yawning emptiness” (68) Devi emerges with her bitter disillusionment with men. She decides to “learn to be a woman at last, (to) walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made” (95). She “leaves her cage” (Kundu: 2000: 82).

Devi’s relationship with Gopal, a man of music, is warm and affectionate. To some extent he tries to offer her what Mahesh failed to offer. But the moment he lifts his mask Devi discerns that he too was infatuated with her. In fact, Devi’s relationships with Dan, Mahesh and Gopal are centred on her sexual appeal. Devi always seems to be on the run in her endeavour to find some solace. Sometimes Devi thinks of herself like the Hindu goddess Durga, the most beautiful manifestation of moral and spiritual power, whom even Shiva, the god of destruction respects. But Mahesh (another name of Shiva) destroys the very spirit of Devi (another name of the mother-goddess). Mahesh and Gopal lose Devi because they could not perceive her soul. Though she comes home from America, in fact her homecoming is her final withdrawal from the male world with all its androcentric values.

Devi finds a good friend in Mayamma. She listens to Mayamma’s experience very closely because Mayamma had accepted all sufferings and never complained because she felt that the success of life for a woman

depended on her ability to endure and go on. Devi's father-in-law also equips her with the same kind of philosophy of life:

The path a woman must walk to reach heaven... is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens (55).

He gives a graphic picture of a virtuous woman thus:

A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him, a 'Sumangali', her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermilion, her arms and neck still ornamented with bangles and gold chains (66-67).

In a hypnotic voice, he says to her daughter-in-law:

The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does (70-71).

But none of these guiding principles could convince Devi. Everything appears to her as hoax and sham, and the result is her alienation from the outside world.

Devi always gets indifference from Mahesh, when she wants to do something to get away from her loneliness. She cannot take a job or learn Sanskrit. Being a woman she cannot play cards with Mahesh's friends. Mahesh shows his disgust to women like Mrs. Lall who are unable to get attuned to their role as a housewife. He snaps at Devi:

This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want? (74).

At this Devi's womanly sensitivity is hurt in such a way that she becomes satiric in her reaction to Mahesh's attitude to her:

He is far too civilized to raise his hand and bring it down on my rebellious body. He snarls instead about women's neurosis and my faulty upbringing (Ibid).

Devi's rebellion comes out in monologues punctuated with interrogatives:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors everyday? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the *thali* round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight? (Ibid).

At times the satire is quite pungent and full of venom in the voice of Devi:

This then is marriage, the end of ends; two or three brief encounters a month when bodies shutter together in lazy inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his finger and demands a smiling handmaiden (54).

Devi finds that her education did not prepare her to play this role of a woman and a wife. She says:

My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood (Ibid).

The story of Uma, another important female character in the novel, reminds Devi of the myth of Amba, the princess who shed her womanhood to achieve her dreams of revenge, and became a man. One can hear the so-called superior male-voice of Salwa, when Amba, rejected by Bheeshma, goes to him: "Do you think I feast on leftovers? I am a King" (37).

Devi ultimately identifies herself with Durga, the goddess who is the destroyer of evil. She says:

I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroic. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads (41).

The ferocious and awe-inspiring image of "Kritya" is also evoked in her psyche. She says:

I read about a *Kritya*, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like *Kali* shouting in hunger. Each age has its *Kritya*. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shutter a *Kritya* (69-70).

Devi feels that throughout her life she has "stumbled on stage alone, greedy for a story of 'her' own" (157), and now the time have come when she has "to stay and fight, to make a sense of it all" (139).

Hence, Githa Hariharan is a representative new voice which cannot remain stifled and silent anymore. It has to resound in order to be heard. It is a prophetic voice announcing the emergence of a new identity. Her pen, which is mightier than the sword, attempts to establish a new order. It pierces quite deep, destroying age-old wisdom, dismantling old myths and heralding a new dawn.