

Marriage and Child Birth: Paradigms of ‘Social Imaginary’ in Githa Hariharan’s ‘The Thousand Faces of Night’

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2022-10034714

Volume: 10

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2022

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 09.02.2022

Accepted: 17.04.2022

Published: 01.06.2022


Citation:
Siddiq, Sinsy. “Marriage and Child Birth: Paradigms of ‘Social Imaginary’ in Githa Hariharan’s ‘The Thousand Faces of Night.’” *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1–3.

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v10i3.4714>



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Abstract

Marriage in Indian concept is undoubtedly knotted with chastity and fulfillment of duties towards spouses. A persistent view of the society inclines these so-called virtues solely to women- the gender that plays the role of ‘relationship savior’ in most of the marriages. Githa Hariharan, an editor and well known Indian writer in her first novel ‘The Thousand Faces of Night’, chose to position women in an arena of idealizing themselves as perfect married off ladies in the society. The three central figures of the novel, Devi, her Amma, Sita and Grandmother are seen in different sequences speaking and performing acts of ‘dharma’ or duties to life. in relation to the enactment of their corresponding roles such as wife, daughter in law, mother and numerous other which does not fall under the roof of marital bonds. Devi’s grandmother takes her through flights of mythical stories and seals her within the walls of trust and fidelity in a married life. The female central character ponders over each story narrated to her by her grandmother and hears mind voices thus placing herself in a world of Social Imaginary. The imaginary (or social imaginary) is the set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. It is common to the members of a particular social group and the corresponding society.

Keywords: Social Imaginary, Marriage, Child Birth, Individuality, Tradition, Myth, Rituals, Dream Sequence, Gods and Goddesses

The novel begins with the living relation of Devi and Dan. Revolving the initial chapters around their life in America, the novelist immerses the analytic womanhood in Devi. The protagonist is found to address her lover as a crazy photographer who clocked pictures wherever she roamed or stood or sat. the woman in Devi found herself liberated enough to see through the soul of a man as himself rather than from the outer shells into which a husband figure is penetrated. It was the beginning of a creation of a world of fantasy for Devi. A blurred one though! Her return to her native place was a totally unexpected and unwanted one for Devi. Gradually the inner woman she had built during her life in America was breaking down. She began to live life of convenience with regard to her mother and grandmother. Her mother once asked her to wear a silk saree to present herself as a grown up; fully glowed up lady in front of their relatives. In fact, wearing dresses in disregard of tradition and society was condemned, for a whole set of people who belong to a particular culture.

Amma was all prepared to spread out the horoscope she had made in name of Devi. It seemed to Devi that the astrologer who sat before her was her executioner. When their eyes met and she was gazing at the man doing some strange curves with his hands and face, she reached the realization that the man could see and predict about the man of her life; her husband. Devi was awestruck at this moment. She even questions her return. Not more than a few days, Amma prepared her *swayamvara*, which in myths was a practice of a woman selecting her husband from a set of men.

Her mother is all-knowing that “All this is just for show”, yet it is mandatory that a lady exhibit herself as a perfect compatible match with the demands in a matrimonial site; far, beautiful, home-loving and prepared too ‘adjust’. She recollects reminiscents from the stories narrated by her grandmother about Damayanti, a mythical character. She explains how beautiful Damayanti looked at the day of her *swayamvara*: like a Princess. She never forgets to assure that Devi too will live the life of a princess after marriage. A fairly woven lie that every girl makes believe themselves at the verge of a marriage. They are pushed into the unfathomed depths of that world where they are meant to be ‘princesses’ but a few turn out to be eventually in a fairy land.

Devi emerged too forward in her thought process enough to attain the revelation that Mahesh her ‘to be husband’ was not a ‘prince’ but a regional manager in a multinational company. As he had to travel a great deal, Mahesh admitted very frankly that Devi will have to pass her time with his father, whom they addressed ‘Baba’ and maidservant lady, Mayamma. Devi felt really relieved that at least Mahesh was willing to be fair with her. Though Devi found herself to be among a crowd of the so-called relatives, everyone left the bride alone because they were too busy. But Devi was not forgotten altogether. They never missed a chance to ask how she liked to cook or how many kids are they planning. Had she been carried off by the charades depicted by her grandmother through mythical stories, she couldn’t been so broad-minded as her husband himself. “If I was going to play out a travesty of the myths that had filled my childhood, I would tear aside all pretence, I thought, I would be as matter-of-fact as Mahesh”; she pondered over.

Unlike her Amma, Devi had to hear no ordinary silly bedtime stories from her grandmother every summer. Once while interrupting the story of Gandhari, Devi asked ‘Why didn’t he come out to welcome her’? Unsurprisingly, she replied, “it’s only in the silly stories you read in books that princes look for princesses. Actually it’s the other way round”. The institution of marriage was enshrined as holy through her other spoken words.

“All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and the deaf ones”.

“Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman. She embraced her destiny – a blind husband with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood”.

Her grandmother’s interpretation of Gandhari’s story reminded Devi of her parents life. They too were living a life of blindness. In their flickering moments, one held the hand of the other and led through the darkened paths. During one of their early days, one morning when Sita played her veena which she had inherited as a part of her dowry, her husband screamed at her, “Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law”? She replied, “Yes I am a wife, a daughter-in-law.” Devi was always pestered by her grandmother that she will be treated as an ample devi at her husband’s home. Whenever she looked her grandmother’s face while saying this, she found a hidden uncertainty behind her pale face. It was not a different story while narrating the tale of celibacy pricked Bheeshma, son of a goddess. Amba, whom Bheeshma let go in spite of the endless love they have for each other, was depicted as a truly courageous woman, not a victim of a disaster.” Once he laid his manly hands on her shoulders, she was no longer a girl. A woman fights her battles alone”; these were the inner ponderings of grandmother. An epic custom that was practiced during the times of grandmother was the planting of a neem and peepal by the newly married couple. Devi wondered the peepal to be more bigger and masculine. Earlier though it was associated with mother goddess; it later changed its sex and became a representation of Lord Vishnu.

Baba was looked up to by Devi as a pill to the betterment and console of her heavy heart. A very enlightened man, he was a true depiction of a modern man “All men are enjoined to cherish women and look after them as their most precious wards; fathers, brothers, husbands and brother-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare.” Such inspired tantric words from a noble personality. He continued, “Women have always been the instruments of the saint’s initiation into *bhakti*. Devi at times when left alone was haunted by Baba’s hypnotic voice chanting her to be joyous as a housewife and adept to all household works; controlled in mind, body, and word.

Mayamma was a silent yet powerful character who has her invisible hands spreaded all over Baba, Devi and Mahesh. She got married when she was twelve and does not lack in any experiences in a marriage. This ritual of

‘Having taken seven steps with me, be my friend; be my inseperable companion. Come let us walk together with this guiding lamp between us. I am the word and you are the melody; I am the melody and you are the word...’ when the smoke cleared mayamma was with her husband. her mother in law always complained her to be slim and barren. She would do all kid of rituals including bathing the all-conquering *lingam* with sandalwood , milk, and her tears of ardour. “A woman without a child ,goes to hell” says the sages. All through these days Amma would write to Devi about motherhood and how she felt when she first held baby Devi in her hands. Mahesh, after his long long tours would return with the question “any news?”. She would answer ‘no news’ as if out of some magical place. She even asked once to Mahesh why he wanted a baby and whether to adopt a child to which Mahesh replied emotionless ,”I’m not sure I would feel the same way about someone else’s child.”

Conclusion

Marriage is an unbounded system which ensures security and mutual understanding. It has to target companionship and not performing duties to one another, though it cannot be regardless. While parents give importance to family status, rituals, caste, dowry and so forth, children give importance to education, character, physical appearance, equipment and skills and psychological well being. Mental well health plays a vital role in relationships in the present era.

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