

THE CONDITION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN GITA HARIHARAN'S NOVELS

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The novel, a distinct and unique genre of literature, has phenomenal growth in contemporary modern society. The wide canvas of the novel that offers greater flexibility and freedom opens up new vistas of experimentation in artistic creativity. This novel discourse that explicates deep nuances of life attracts a number of creative talents to the field, bestowing a place of prominence for most of them. In the post 1980 era Indian English women novelists questioned and analyzed some of the leading themes such as love, sex, and marriage or the failure of it in a bold and rather revolutionary/ radical manner. Women novelists asserted the rights of women to live their life in their own way. These women writers neither flaunted their biological or psychological differences nor raved about the otherness of women. Instead, there was a conviction in their writing about the universality of all human experience. They sensitively portrayed a world that had in it a woman rich in substance. Their women were real flesh and blood protagonists who made one to look at them with awe in relation to their surroundings, society, men, children, families, mental make-ups and themselves. It seems that every creative artist adopted an effective mode in expressing their felt expression.

Githa Hariharan an epoch making star in Indian fiction in English and a celebrated expatriate writer is rather unique with her sensitive portrayal of characters. She is preoccupied with the inner world of sensibility and no longer remains satisfied with women's passive role as women and wife. Hence she expresses her angry protest and erodes the age-old wisdom of saying proverbs, stories, myths and beliefs. Her anger expresses itself through the mode of satire, irony and sarcasm. Also, her vision encompasses the whole history of woman's role and edifies the emergence of new woman who is true to her own self. Such a woman born into a social enterprise is moulded by the social structure that distinguishes an individual's wants, cognitions, interpersonal response traits, and attitudes. Therefore, individuality of a woman is the sum total of her feelings, emotions, thoughts, and the way of expression of these blended by others or societal norms and beliefs. She becomes the amalgam of her own thoughts and also of others.

Individuality, that becomes the focal point for women writers of modern era, refers to the aggregate of properties particular to an individual. Many such women writers dwell deep into the individual's psyche and analyze the throbs and passions of an individual in

minute details. Githa Hariharan, one of the champions of individual spirit, reflects that one's individuality gets disintegrated under the materialistic pursuit of man negating the existence of humanness and spirituality. She successfully delineates the concept of individuality in her novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, and *In Times of Siege*. The Thousand Faces of Night projected the individuality of three women characters- Devi, Sita and Mayamma. Mayamma got married at early stage, had bitter memories but accepted her fate to endure the burden of her life. Sita married at twenty, proved to be a perfect wife, ad a daughter-in-law. She too had hurdles in her married life and adjusted to the situations without losing her individuality. She changed things according to her own choice. She at the end of the novel had the support of 'Devi' in life. Devi lived in fantasies all through her childhood. The two choices Devi had made resulted in non-fulfillment. She could not adjust with Mahesh and Gopal and left them as they failed to recognize her as an individual. She returned to her mother who was eagerly waiting for her. She had to start life afresh and this time Sita was there to lend her support.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* she sensitively portrayed the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captured the split consciousness through a set of representative characters with both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality. It was the story of Devi's quest for a self image. Having failed to define her identity within the framework of the male oriented social structures, that is, as a wife in an arranged marriage or even as a rebellious love, Devi finally returned to her mother. It was in relationship to her mother that Devi hoped to find an identity for herself. The story of Devi, a woman in the process of 'becoming' on her own terms, was interlaced with the narratives of Sita, personifying perfect motherhood and Mayamma, whose motherhood was socially defined as failed. Thus through the stories of Devi, Sita and Mayamma, *The Thousand Faces of Night* brought alive the underworld of Indian women's lives and their individuality.

In *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, Hariharan highlighted the concept of individuality mainly through the retired teacher Vasu master. The novel began by analyzing the psychological fall out of retirement, the suffocating emptiness, the feelings of displacement and the loss of individual's sense of purpose and identity. Over the years, Vasu master's vocation was his only source of emotional sustenance and his role as teacher expanded to fill every cranny of his life and when his long teaching career drew to a close, he was struck with the realization that those were nothing else for him to look forward to. His wife Mangala had been dead for over twenty years and his children and grandchildren dwindled to peripheral figures, no more real than the letter they felt duty-bound to write to him. Inevitably his retirement brought with it an overwhelming sense of bewilderment

and Vasu master retreated within the pealing walls of him room to pore over old scrap books in a futile attempt to recreate his days as a teacher.

Everything changed when all of a sudden a very unusual student was entrusted into his care. Mani, his new pupil with a head like 'a long ripe papaya' was apparently unteachable. He was caved, shouted at, tied up and really bounded out of school for disruptive behavior and now refused to speak to anyone. As the 'lessons' progressed, Vasu Master began to realize that in order to 'teach' the boy, he must first heal the pain within him, by teaching the stories of Panchatantra, Vasu Master had succeeded in taming the 'unteachable' Mani. Thus the individuality of Vasu Master acquired new dimensions and Vasu Master advanced deeper into the subterranean passage ways of contemplation. The veils that hid the truths he had so far refused to confront were stripped away and he came face to face with the ghosts from his past: his father's suicide, the attraction he had once felt for Jameela, his wife's friend and lastly his sense of guilt and regret at the self-centered life he had led, refusing to reach out to anyone, even his own family. Vasu Master not only indulged in straight forward self-analysis but also constantly reiterated his findings in the form of personal myths, tales and allegories.

Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* was replete with recounting of various kinds of inequalities and power struggle. It probed so many questions that baffled the modern man, such as, what defined as individual within the bounds of nationhood? Whether secularism was a valid ideal? Could an individual keep his head straight without being trampled by the forces of society? The novel provided a compassionate but topical look at the collective lives in the throes of religious intolerance, communal division and social disparities. The characters in the novel put on a daring attempt to assert their individuality in the crashing and engulfing forces that besieged them.

In *Times of Siege* primarily dealt with Murthy's ardour for Meena. Hariharan's infatuated academic felt empowered by his very brief physical contact with Meena. "Fish-eyed dark-browed, tangle-haired, wide-hipped, generous lipped...The list he can chant seems endless." (49-50), Yodels? Murthy, leaving the reader at a loss, as there was little in the young woman to kindle similar sentiments in the observer.

Towards the end of the novel, Hariharan seemed to go back to the book that she originally started with. Actually, Murthy's struggle was not with castigating his lesson but with the twenty-four year old temptation still lying in his study, waiting to get the cast off her leg. There was a clumsy, half sexual encounter and there she was gone, back into her world, confident, decisive and above all young. At that moment the political part of the book seemed irrelevant, almost unnecessary. More than that Meena stood as a moral support in all his falls.

Hariharan, who wrote in a clean and straight forward manner, succeeded in picturizing various concepts like woman hood, individuality etc., and also in describing the relevance of these concepts in modern Indian society. Her novels present the efforts of patriarchy on women from different social classes and ages, particularly the varied responses to the restrictive institution of marriage, especially in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. It evokes characters from the mythology and the lives of saints and relates them to the characters in the novel. Hariharan shows that all through the ages the society had sustained the same ideal of womanhood by handing down behavioural patterns. But some characters like Sita and Parvati Amma, though they were steeped in the Hindu value system, manage to find space and scope for rebellion within the institution they conform to. They used their state of oppression as a weapon against the very structure that holds them back. This subtle but powerful act of subversion and control made them to feel that they had their space and power to direct their destiny and even that of others. But in effect they had internalized marginalization and contributed considerably to the reinforcement of patriarchal values.

Hariharan portrayed the sacrificing nature of traditional women through the character of Mangla in *The Ghost of Vasu Master*. But in the same novel she had given yet another face of women by portraying Vasu Master's grandmother. Even though she was an illiterate lady she was able to judge matters objectively and she didn't obey her husband blindly. She was dare enough to mock at his mistakes. Though In Times of Siege, Hariharan depicted the role of woman as a moral supporter to man as done by Meena. Thus through these three novels, Hariharan successfully portrayed the multifaceted role of individual self in the present scenario. She also juxtaposed the role and position of women in our society. She delineated the concepts of woman in a traditional society and the responsibilities and services expected from woman. Hariharan in her novels reassessed the objective of self-transcendence. The use of symbolism and reflection was indicative of an attempt to reinterpret the primal scars of one's fantasy. This reflective consciousness developed progressively to arrive at a possible orientation towards transcendence through a classification of experience. The ideal of such reflection would be self knowledge or self identity through knowledge of life. Her novels moved on to arrive at varying levels of intellectual self-realization which enabled the characters to either attain liberation or reconciliation through self knowledge. She had also succeeded in tracing the battles of woman in her relationship with man and society, not to urban existential angst but to times immemorial. The privacy given to motherhood in contemporary fiction in terms of power or vulnerability was also dealt with in her novels.

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