

Mindset of Women Characters in Githa Hariharan's Novel

The Thousand Faces of Nights

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Abstract - India is one of the ancient countries with rich heritage and traditional values. Woman in the country is identified as mother, potential creator, and idolizing mother is integral part of Indian culture and civilizations. Despite being regarded as symbol of creativity, woman has been oppressed and deprived of equal rights with men. Provision of literacy to women, which has resulted in economic liberty, has been an eye-opener to claim their equality among men. But the happiness in their day today living may not have been decided by their new found liberty but their mindset. The women characters in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Nights* indirectly reflect the concept in their portrayal by the novelist. Despite their experiences of hardships, Sita, protagonist Devi's mother, her grandma and Mayamma have a positive attitude towards life and find some kind of happiness and contentment in life. At the same, the mindset of Devi and her mother-in-law Parvathamma does not suit good enough to the demands of Indian society. Their attitude challenges the existence of family, one of the oldest institutions of Indian society.

Key words: 1. Mindset – attitude 2. *Pati* – grandmother 3. *Veena* – Indian stringed instrument 4. TFN – The Thousand Faces of Night.

In the history of the world, the Indian subcontinent is known for its great traditional values and rich cultural heritage. At the same time, the womenfolk from the continent claim to have been oppressed, deprived of equal rights with men, and critical of male chauvinism. It has been a Himalayan task to uplift the condition of women in Indian subcontinent in spite of enormous efforts of social reformers. The Indian society has a long way to go to place the women, the better-half of men, in a better position. Great attention has been focused on the literacy of women which provides self-confidence and economic independence.

The literacy of womenfolk leads to financial independence of women in the male dominated society. Now the question is whether the provision of literacy of women and their economic freedom have provided them more happiness than their ancestors who did not enjoy the modern provisions. Neither the economical freedom nor the literacy of women, which resulted in their indifference towards their social compulsion, has guaranteed the happiness and contentment in life. Very often their new found independence challenges the very existence of the family, one of the oldest institutions of human society. It is not the intelligence or the provisions of literacy which decides the happiness and contentment in life but their mindset. Githa Hariharan's depiction of women characters in her novel *The Thousand Faces Of Night* indirectly lends credence to this concept while revealing the mindset of the characters.

Githa Hariharan's women characters from three generations of same family, display their different mindset influenced by their surroundings, education and economic independence. Grandmother, *pati* of Devi, a widow from her early thirties, lives in a village of Brahmin community. She has no regrets of being left alone in the village house by her son. Ignorance of modern development is bliss of her life that she pays little attention to the rights of womenfolk but she is aggressive towards any disapproval of her own traditional belief. She does not care much her physical appearance and is always found draped in a nine-yard sari, requiring not other additional garments. Her great love for her beloved granddaughter Devi keeps her waiting for her arrival in the summer vacation. She has a benevolent heart to help the orphaned and oppressed women in the village.

Illiteracy of *pati* does not limit her knowledge of stories from the Indian epics. She always relates each

and every incident of life to the stories from the *Puranas*. All enquiries that arise in the little mind of Devi are readily responded with stories which reveal the condition of women in the ancient Indian epics. The stories leave a great impact in the mind of Devi. She understands what is expected of a woman in an Indian society. With so much of her experience in life, the old woman attempts to carry the traditional values and traditional heritage to her future generation through Devi. *Pati* has no depression being widowed at her young age and never regrets missing things in life. At the twilight of her life, she contents herself to have had an accomplished life. She is willing to face the fate whatever it has left to her as a woman in traditional Indian society. She allows fate to take its own course but be contented with the things, life has given. At her death bed, she blesses Devi wholehearted that her motherly love may protect Devi even after her death.

Sita, Devi's mother, is mentally a strong woman. Though she is not attractive physically, her skill of play *veena* earns her a good position in the family of her husband. She is a woman of conviction and discipline. When the question of her choice to decide whether to entertain the family with her skill of playing *veena*, or to be a homemaker, she readily confines herself to the latter choice to please the husband's family. She is appreciated by her own mother-in-law and her act is compared to the sacrifice of Kandari who blindfolded her eyes when she found her husband blind, in the Indian epic, the Mahabharat. Sita is the woman behind her husband's rise in the ladder of promotion in the office. With the skill of adaptability, she patiently waits for the opportunity to execute her plan in the family of her own. Her sacrifices are without complaints and she swallows bitter pills in silence. Clinging to the womanhood comes to her naturally.

Sita went into labour without a twitch on her dark face; she remained impassive, a model patient, during a childbirth the doctor claimed was the easiest she had ever seen. The minute the baby was laid in her arms, free of the umbilical cord, Sita refused to let any of the nurses touch her. She had new *veena* to play on, and this time she was not going to give it up so easily (TFN 104).

Parenting the child has stiffened herself as a possessive and disciplined mother that she carries out

her responsibility with iron hand. The challenges in her domestic life are faced with a swiftness and decisiveness. Her commitment to bring up the child is not distracted by any of her other responsibilities that she closely monitors each and every needs of the daughter. She enjoys herself as the decision maker of the family she ignores the comments of others at her decision to send her daughter to the US for her higher studies. Having left with no support at the death of her husband in a foreign land, she is strengthened her will to face life boldly. Immediately arriving at the airport, she detaches herself from the mourning relatives who are politely asked to stay away from her. She does not want to be an object of pity and conducts herself majestically in front of the relatives.

Sita has the great sense of finding the things within the limits of her magical powers. Her decision, getting back Devi from the US and finding a life partner in Mahesh, is perfected well, after rigorous investigation of horoscopes. With the guiding mottoes, 'Good housekeeping, good taste, hard work' (10), she cherishes her life settling down in the seashore home in Madras after her daughter's marriage. Sita has no sense of remorse, when she receives the telegram message from Devi's husband Mahesh that Devi has gone off from the house. Sita's only request has been, not to scandalize the matter and she patiently waits with her *veena* for Devi's home return. Being a practical lady, Sita ignores to evaluate the feminist concepts of equality, liberation and status of women in the male dominant Indian society. The mindset of Sita is positive, acknowledging her limitation of being a female, at the same time, play a convincing role as a daughter-in-law, wife and responsible mother to her daughter.

The mindset of Devi is different from that of her mother and grandmother, with her American graduation. Arriving from the US, Devi compares her relationship with her mother to her classmate Julie in New Jersey. Julie chats with her mother about boyfriends, expressing their love, kissing and hugging each other. But Devi is not comfortable in the company of her own mother. Sita keeps distance and has no patience to listen to her daughter and her experiences in the foreign land. Devi has no interest in getting married, but she is also not bold enough to express her mind to her mother it is nightmare to Devi to think of being in wedlock.

The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, and I see now that I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor. I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck and let the blood gush, the passion of the sacrifice whole, all-encompassing (54).

Though Devi convinces her mind to marry Mahesh after talking to him, he appears to her “a polite stranger” or “a reasonable stranger” (49). When he declares his purpose of marriage that his wife is to look after his family and children, Devi is at loss as she is not able to fit herself into the life of an Indian housewife.

In the male dominated society of India, the women prove themselves superior to men as potential creator, mother of child. Motherhood is the energizing symbol of creativity and mother worship is common in the Indian context beyond the barriers of religion, language and political ideology. Being an Indian woman, Devi does not realize that her husband would expect her to be mother as early as possible after their marriage. Mahesh initiates to consult a doctor when Devi fails to conceive. Devi considers, listening to gynecologist and taking advice for her personal sexual life, a bothering matter. She wonders shy Mahesh is so much concerned about having a child of his own.

Devi is unable to identify herself with the life Indian housewife. As a homemaker of the house, she feels it is a burden to run the domestic requirement of her husband and the family with a housemaid at her disposal she regrets that her education is wasted as a wife of an Indian. The absence of mother-in-law at her husband's house provides her sense of relief. The father-in-law, Baba, keeps her good company with his taste for music whenever Mahesh is on his business tour. Baba too talks about duty of woman in Hindu dharma and reminds her of her grandma.

‘The path of a woman must walk to reach heaven,’ says Baba, ‘is 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. On the death of her husband, the chaste wife, established to continence, reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practised self-control’(55).

Though Devi enjoys Baba's company, she is unwilling to take up the Indian values into her life. With no aim at a visible distance of her family life, she suffers an identity crisis. When she finds it is unable to regulate her abundance of time, she takes herself to consuming alcohol and attempts to find solace in the company of Gopal, a musician in her neighbourhood. She too takes an extreme step no Indian housewife would ever dare, accompanying Gopal to a private concert in Delhi without the knowledge of her husband Mahesh.

The US educated girl is not able to fit herself into a typical Indian domestic life. The values which hold Indian families together mean little to Devi and she looks out for happiness away from her domestic life. Devi becomes a practical failure to cope with the little demands of her husband as any husband in Indian society would expect from his wife. As an in-law in the family of Mahesh and Baba, Devi is in a far better level of comfort in comparison to her own mother, grandmother and the millions of Indian housewives. Her mindset is not in a position to find happiness in family but aspiring for a life that is in her imagination.

Mayamma, the housemaid in the house of Mahesh, experiences all kinds of ill-treatment from her mother-in-law for no fault of hers. The punishment, meted out to her for not being able to conceive a child for ten years, is too much to bear. Birth and growth of her son worsens her conditions that the hope of salvage is dampened by the lavishness of her son who hits her with iron frying pan for refusing to part with her diamond ring. The great solace, she attains at her middle age, is in the accommodation of Mahesh family. She develops no grudges against her mother-in-law who has ill-treated her severely and serves her wholeheartedly at her deathbed. Her experiences in life make her realize that **nothing stays forever in one's** life and the life is to be lived at it takes its own course.

Parvathamma, the mother of Mahesh, is ambitious in her search for God after having begotten a son and raising a family of her own. She fails to identify her duty as a mother, locks herself into a *puja* room, ignoring the requirements of the school-going young boy. On a fine day, she detaches herself from the family, unaware of its infliction of emptiness in the minds of male members of the family, the husband and the son.

Conclusion - The physical condition of women, social expectation and conventional belief may have left them

in a state of dependency upon their male counterparts in the society. Majority of womenfolk enjoy the comfort of dependency as wife has to be subordinate to the head of the family for its smooth running. Of course, the provision of literacy and education to the womenfolk in Indian society is supposed to have enhanced them with better understanding of life in the modern competitive world. The women may enjoy more freedom for all her

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intelligence in the modern world, when she keeps up the traditional values of the Indian society. It culminates in restlessness in the minds of the women, in case the women attempt to liberate themselves from the shackles of family responsibility. Most often it becomes a selfish act of woman which challenges the very existence of the family system in the society.

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