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Understanding the Conflicts in the Personality of 'Devi' from *Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

This study of the first novel, *Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan, focus on the life of Devi. The main aim of this paper is to understand the character of Devi and the role culture plays in the development of conflict in her. The impact of mythological stories about how women should be, and her own developing dreams and desires bring the changes in her behaviour.

Keywords: *Myth and Modernity, Cultural Identity, Female Psyche, Personality Development, Patriarchal Norms.*

Introduction-

The Thousand Faces of Night is not some kind of book that simply showcases the turmoil of female in Indian Society, but it is a blend of myth and modernity. The portrayal of mythological tales with the intention of highlighting the situations of every day woman in modern society, regardless of any generation, is not something that has been often seen in Indian fiction. The kind of connectivity Hariharan creates, is commendable. The story throws light on the life of women of three different generations- **Devi**, a well-educated woman studied in abroad, an only child of **Sita**, the second main character of the novel who presents herself in highly influential manner. The third significant character is **Mayamma**, an elderly housekeeper in the in-laws house of Devi who has seen the brutal height of patriarchy throughout her life.

This study, specifically shifts the attention towards the personality development and impact of prevalent culture on the psyche of Devi. In every episode of her life Devi sets a relative angle with the stories that her grandmother had told her in her childhood. In every story there is a message that Devi had to understand. Devi herself states, "My grandmother's stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple: they had to be decoded. A comparison had to be made, an illustrations discovered, and a moral drawn out." (27) Reminisces of childhood has played significant role on the psyche of Devi as no matter wherever she belonged the glimpses of her past days always showed up. All the characters from the stories of her grandmother left an imprint on the minds of Devi. In 'Social Realism in *The Thousand Faces of Night*' presents, "After listening all these stories, Devi got a habit to imagine herself as a heroine, an amalgam of all heroines of the tales. With all this, she expected to encounter them in her future life or perform like them. Along with the mythical characters, her mother Sita also has left a deep impression on her mind." This statement also gets hold with the words of Devi, "I lived a secret life of my own: I became a women warrior, a heroine. I was devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons." (41)

All these stories presented one or the other characteristics of how women in ancient time behaved and what are the ideas of good Indian women. The introduction on the cover page of this book itself says 'What makes a dutiful daughter, wife and mother? What makes a good Indian woman?' This book justifies the statement as well. The stories of Devi's grandmother, her father-in-law and Mayamma, all are woven in such a manner that tells how a good daughter, mother or a wife must behave.

Devi also creates the connection among these stories and the stories of real life women around her.

According to *The Cambridge Handbook of Personality Psychology* 'Personality refers to important and relatively stable characteristics within a person that account for consistent patterns of behaviour. Aspects of personality may be observable and unobservable, and conscious or unconscious' (4). It further adds 'personality deals with the wide range of human behaviour. Personality includes virtually everything about a person- mental, emotional, social and physical (3). Although personality is dynamic in nature yet some aspects of human beings have been classified as normal.

The norms have been already set not only for good Indian woman but also for being a woman. Such norms create conflict between the personality that is imposed on a person by society and the type of personality a person develops by himself through other vital factors that develop personality, such as- family, physical environment, heredity and experiences. In the *Culture and Psyche* the views of Karen Horney has been presented over the relation between culture and individual psyche she suggested, 'there are not only cultural variations in customs, and thus in the realm of individual superego, but also at the basic level of drives and feelings.' She has presented her views in the opposition of Freud, according to whom the instinctual drives and objective relationships commonly seen in Western culture as biologically determined human nature (8). In the reference of Horney's idea it is clearly stated that the culture plays a vital role in developing basic drives and feelings, which acts like cultural norm. She had given two characteristics of neurosis, 'the first characteristic of a neurosis, its dynamic centre, was fear and defences of individual would, however, become neurotic only when they deviated in quantity or quality from the fears and defences patterned in his or her culture. Similarly, with the regard to the second characteristic of a neurosis, the presence of inner conflict, the conflicts become neurotic only if they were sharper and more accentuated than the common conflicts existing in the culture.' (8)

The presented ideas are supporting the belief that if the culture is rigid and the ideas and beliefs have great influence on the people, they won't be very flexible in accepting the deviation from it. If the inhibitions that generate in a person, is not something that is right according to cultural norm then the person will either start repressing it or simply break the cultural bound. Both the defence mechanisms are not so easy to deal with. As repression will lead to deprivation of mental health and breaking the norm will develop the fear of rejection. In both the scenarios, the result is suffering or can also lead toward neurosis.

In the case of Devi the question is not about whether she was neurotic or not but she was completely affected by the cultural patterns that have been inculcated in her mind in such a way that she found bounded even when she was in different country. While being in America she has felt the 'the burden of indianness'. She admired the black woman who was clear about her rights, but somewhere she found herself distant. When she was at the home of Dan, his friend in America, some glimpses of her feeling of not being the part of it are there, 'Devi sat surrounded by people, in increasing isolation, terrified of drawing attention to herself. But aching for any means just to do that.' (4) The duality of her thoughts are apparently visible. The burden of indianness has been inhibited in her personality due to which she never thought of marriage proposal of Dan, even when she considered him her significant friend and when Dan posed a statement that she is afraid of taking the risk, she retorted not being sure of what she meant, 'Going back is bigger risk. I thought you would see that.' (6)

She could not even consider about his marriage proposal as marrying someone from another country was not expected of her. She knew her mother has not sent her for this. When she returned to her home land, her mother was proud as she proved all her relatives wrong who were disappointed on her as she sent her unmarried daughter to America. They gave her examples of the girls or boys who went there, married Americans and forgot about their ageing parents. (14)

Her returning to home shows how it is unclear of what she is admiring, 'She felt a piercing ache to see her mother. But equally powerful was a nameless dread of the familiar love, stifling and all-pervasive; of a world beyond her classroom and laboratory, charged with a more pungent uncertainty.' (10) She also referred that her brief dream was over which the end of her American day and her home coming.

In the second phase of her life, her marriage her *swayamvar*, as her grandmother's stories has set forth in her mind, she got married Mahesh but with the prospect of her mother. Mahesh was a regional manager and not a prince (supposed to be in *swayamvar*). He used to travel a lot. Devi shared her new house with her father-in-law and an elderly maid servant Mayamma. Having the notion of how a married woman should be, in regard with the stories of her grandmother she started her life but it was not as she expected. Her relation with Mahesh was very distant. In her in-laws house her only companion was her father-in-law and his stories of how a woman should be. Devi states, "His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear." (51) Like her father-in-law, Mayamma and her struggles of life also reflected the 'shoulds' of woman. The history of her own life showed the ugly image of patriarchy in her time. In

the prelude Devi sheds the light over the incident of asking a question. In response to Devi's question, Mayamma told her a heart wrenching story of how her mother-in-law behaved with her, when she asked a question. Cautioning Devi she says, "So be careful, Devi, when you next ask a question."

In the eyes of Mahesh, Devi was never admired for anything. He questioned her thoughts, her beliefs, and her work, what she wants, what she wants to be. The domination of Mahesh in their life, the existence of patriarchal conviction was there. Devi tried to be a good wife as far as her conflicts did not break the wall of righteousness. As she had lessons like, "All husbands are noble, Devi. Even the blind and deaf ones." (29) But the cultural ideas were not enough to make her digest the kind of life she received. So she decided to escape. This has been simply illustrated in the paper *Self Assertion of Devi in Githa Hariharan's Thousand Faces of Night*, "Devi is not happy with her husband and decides to fall in love with her lover, Gopal. But since it is unacceptable in a traditional society, she becomes an open subject to everyone's comment and leering. Devi feels for no one in her life and feels isolated in the society, so she searches for companions."

She found the missing love and affection in Gopal, a musician. Her growing desires made her do something that is unacceptable in the society. Suffocating her needs, desires, her whole identity is better than finding and fulfilling her needs. She eloped with Gopal. But her expectations with him fades away and at the end she returned to her mother.

Conclusion-With the closer analysis of the character of Devi, we can reach at the conclusion that at first she tried to hold all the ideas of how a woman should behave and what are the attributes of a good woman. The inculcation of ideas of a good Indian woman were always there in her mind. All the stories that she heard about mythological characters and about all the women around her set the ground for her cultural identity. But the experiences are always different from expectations. The same happened with Devi, at first she tried to be a wife she was expected to be, but the lack of love, empathy and consideration of her choices woke up the rival in her who rejected the idea of being a good wife. She said no to motherhood. Although through the words of Mayamma it has been shown that the motherhood is something that defines the whole life of a woman. She says, "A woman without a child, say the sages, goes to hell." (81) She tried to repress her conflicts but she could not sustain more in her marriage or in the cloak of a 'good Indian woman'. Her elopement with her lover is analogy to break the norms that has been set for woman. At the end she left her lover as well and chose to be free.

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