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Debating Gender Discrimination and Violence in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan belongs to the new generation of Indian writers who have earned greater visibility and readership for Indian English Literature. As a writer she is preoccupied with human condition which to her is the pre-requisite and the essence of creative writing in general and of literature in particular. Apparently, she chooses a small space for almost all her novels but endeavors to enlarge the limited space to such an extent that it becomes an elaborate presentation of human condition. Hariharan believes in inclusiveness, which extends and broadens an individual's social horizon. She thinks that writers have a socio-political responsibility as well. They are not rarefied creatures, above or at a tangent from the world around. In her view, it is completely ridiculous to expect writers to be uninvolved. Writers are citizens like everyone else and they should be socially and politically engaged, they have a special responsibility to discharge—to reveal truths that are fundamentally related to human condition. Like almost all distinguished writers of Indian English Literature, Hariharan too is aware of the controversy concerning the writing in English and writing in Indian languages. Speaking about the ticklish issue of 'authenticity' in Indian English Literature in general and in her own writing in particular, she does not conceal her mixed feelings of indignation and disgust. Hariharan thinks that within India the official line on representation seems too often get reduced to writing in English versus other Indian languages.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Discrimination, Exploitation, Male, Peripheral

This paper tries to debate the various modes of gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society, articulated in vivid forms by the novelist. Hariharan's debut novel, *The Thousand*

Faces of Night was published in 1992. Critics have read and analyzed it from many angles, focusing on woman-centeredness, myth and its remembering, the larger issue of gender-discrimination, the question of identity, the theme of quest and the impact of storytelling on a child when he/she grows into an adult. Notwithstanding the diverse interpretations and analyses of the novel, the fact remains that the novel focuses on essential human condition in the specific context of women in India. Thus, Hariharan has clarified her stance as a writer that she is committed to women's cause without hanging on to the crutch of any political ideology. *The Thousand Faces of Night* seems to represent the plight of Indian women who seek their paradise in the fulfillment of the dreams conjured up by the myths of ancient women. Hariharan has successfully exposed and debunked these myths about women as they are fundamentally created by patriarchy as tools to keep women under subjection and compliance. However, she does not spare those women who think they are free to lead their lives as they wish and shows how they finally meet misery and suffering when the opportunities of remorse, repentance or improvement are foreclosed. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is remarkable not only for the contemporary relevance of its theme - women and gender question - but for its lucid presentation also. The novelist has arranged the structure of the novel, dividing it into three parts. The first part of the novel comprises three chapters whereas the second and the third chapter contain two chapters each. This structural framework gains force by the Prelude which sets the tone and the thematic focus of the novel - Mayamma's tale of suffering.

The opening chapter of the first part of the novel acquaints us with the protagonist, Devi while she is preparing to leave for India from New Jersey, U.S.A. where she had gone to complete her M.A. During her two-year stay there, she developed friendly relations with a black American Dan who was enamored of her features and personality. With Dan, Devi got an opportunity to closely observe the social and emotional lives of black people. As Dan was sincere in his love, he proposed to marry Devi but she declined because despite of her western education and openness of interaction she was still tied to her native roots and traditions. She might have done for two reasons: her grandmother's stories that every bride dreams for a prince to marry her in all glory and splendor; and her attachment to her Amma, Sita who she could not even imagine to betray.

It is in the second chapter of the first part of *The Thousand Faces of Night* that Devi's story begins to unfold, bringing to light her family, especially her mother who is currently her sole guardian, her father having died a few years back. As Devi has returned to India for good, she lives with her mother in their house at Madras: "My mother and I live alone in the house by the sea. Our rooms, with identical windows overlooking the beach, are next to each other." (Hariharan: 1992: 12) Devi reflects with surprise that as a family they have seen very little of their relatives in Madras. Devi and her parents had always been a tightly - knit little

nucleus of their own. She suspects that her mother wanted it that way. The relatives might have been eager with curiosity 'to ferret out a few house of entertaining speculation if the circumstances in Devi's household took an unusual turn. However, Devi dismisses this thought of relatives wishing to poke their noses in the matters of her family because Devi's father had left substantial sum for Devi's marriage as also for her mother's sustenance. Unlike many western-educated young women, Devi likes and admires her mother's protective gestures: "But like a gift to celebrate my home-coming, Amma has kept them all at bay. In this fortress that shuts out the rest of the world, I grope towards her, and she weaves a cocoon, a secure womb that sucks me and holds me fast to its thick sticky walls." (Ibid: 1992: 13)

The above reflection might well serve as an apt prelude to the theme of mother-daughter relationship which finally crystallizes into what is now commonly termed as female bonding, a lesson learnt by Devi from her grandmother and later refreshed and grown through Mayamma Devi had observed and recognized her mother's protective gestures right from her childhood. After her return from the States, she finds her mother less distant, more vulnerable. Devi understands the nature of this change. Her mother loved her but she always put on a cloak of reserve and detachment lest she might be mistaken as a doting mother who was likely to spoil her only child. Devi recalls her western friend Julie's uninhibited love for her mother, which is incompatible in Indian situations. Devi's mother also loved her more than any mother could, but she did not make a travesty of her motherly affection because she exercised control on her emotions: "Amma and I didn't touch each other and we certainly did not talk about love, for each other or anyone else. But in the first few weeks after my return to Madras, we were intensely conscious of each other; we were pulled together by a tender protectiveness that encircled our necks with its fine threads. Drawn together, my dead father's memory receding for the moment, we became a one-celled unit. We became not a family, but mother and daughter." (Ibid: 1992: 13)

This bonding between the daughter and the mother began to grow day by day. Devi was elated by the possibilities of her newly-made friendship with her mother. But Devi soon realized that this new spurt of bonding was not without motive on her mother's part: "Like a veteran chess player she made her moves. I have to give her credit for her sense of timing... led me to her carefully laid plans - a marriage for me, a swayamvara." (Ibid: 1992: 14) In this way, Devi's shrewd and seasoned mother prepared her for the rituals which precede the arranged marriages. Devi too let herself be led by the wishes and instructions of her mother for she was her only child and was loathe hurting her even the least. So she followed every instruction, draping sarees of silk, in accompaniment with ornaments, flowers and some small talk in the presence of the prospective grooms when they and their families visited for the ritual.

Like the traditional marriages in India, Devi's marriage was also an arranged one. As a young woman she was allowed little freedom to choose her husband. Rather she had to choose one from the given lot. Finally, she chose Mahesh who was no prince of her dreams which were settled in her psyche through the stories of swayamvara in which the princess had the freedom to choose a husband of her desire. When she confronts the stark and hard reality of life, she has to move away from the world of fantasy. She met and accepted Mahesh supported by the blessings and the approval of her mother. Devi's assessment of Mahesh is quite realistic, shorn of glamour and the dreamy visions of a prince coming to wed her: "Mahesh, the stranger who is to be my husband, visits us for an hour every evening. He is no prince, but a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste." (Ibid: 1992: 22)

Apparently, Devi accepts her lot when Mahesh tells her about his busy work-schedule. He would stay in Bangalore only ten days of the month and the rest of the month would be spent in business trips from one place to another. She liked Mahesh's frankness, his willingness to be fair, even if he did seem to be unbending pillar of propriety and good sense. In her estimate Mahesh was different from other prospective husbands: "He is honest at least, I thought, he admits to wanting a woman at home who will be a wife and a mother. Some of the others I had met had amazed me with their pretences that they were not shopping for a wife. They had chatted and charmed, grilled me about America. While they looked into my eyes amorously, as if we had met for a romantic purpose, they sneaked out questions about what food I liked to cook and how many children I wanted to have." (Ibid: 1992: 22-23)

Devi is able to recognize the hypocrisy of the male world which seeks to impose stereotyped roles on women, as a mother as a wife. The male view demands that a woman entering the wedlock should be pliant enough to play the roles of a good cook, a caring wife and a loving mother. In other words, a woman is identified by her virtues of patience, tolerance and silence. If a woman is bold enough to assert her freedom and identity, the male society brands her as an unbridled horse. Devi's cognitive powers enable her to accept the reality and she decided to cast off all pretences: "If I was going to play out a travesty of the myths that had filled my childhood, I would tear aside all pretences, I thought, I would be as matter of fact as Mahesh." (Ibid: 1992: 23)

Amidst the preparations of her marriage ceremony, Devi recalls her grandmother, her physical features and most of all the stories of mythical women from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Devi got the opportunity of listening to the stories of these self-sacrificing, brave, courageous and bold women in summer vacations when she went to stay with her grandmother. This bond continued till Devi was sixteen years old after which her visits came to an abrupt end. Her grandmother had a story for every particular occasion and most of her stories were about the heroic ordeals of mythical women. These mythical heroines included

Damayanti, Gandhari, Sita, Amba and others. Before the grandmother died, she said it was her blessing that would protect Devi when her soul was in flight. Embedded with the mythical stories of the grandmother is Devi's dream story in which she envisions herself as a superwoman, because her mind was filled with the account of heroic women who figured in grandmother's stories. Now Devi's mind was stuffed with fantasies which made their appearance in her dreams: "I dreamt often of a god-like hero flew effortlessly across the night-sky, and who guided me gently when he saw my own desperate desire to fly with him. I also had recurring nightmares, in which the weightless, smooth gliding I now craved was brought to an abrupt, halt, mid-flight." (Ibid: 1992: 46)

This desire to fly has a metaphorical and symbolic significance because Devi is soon disillusioned with her marriage. Despite her firm resolve to be matter-of-fact like her husband, Mahesh, she feels disenchanting. Her inability to bear a child also adds to her disillusionment and disorientation. She finds herself torn between her dreams and the hard reality. However, she tries her best to accept her married status and her husband's family as part of her new life which has just begun Mahesh's parental house is located on Jacaranda Road. It is a large house, giving the impression that a big joint family sometime populated it: "The house reeks of character. Nothing here is symmetrical or alike; no concession is made to the merely pretty. A large wild garden full of old trees surrounds the house...." (Ibid: 1992: 48)

The rooms downstairs have high ceilings and a mosaic floor. Only one room looks friendly and that is her old father-in-law's haven. The rest of the house is unclaimed and unmanageable. An old crone Myamma has ruled the house for years. Unsurprisingly, Myamma's tale of her own life unfolds in Part II of the novel and almost dominates it, voicing the suffering of ordinary women. But the details of how Devi is faring with her husband Mahesh and her assessment of his character and feelings run as simultaneous strands. This is very important in view of Devi's attempts at identifying herself in relation to her husband and her cognition of the value of companionship in marriage which she rejects later on. Her reflections on Mahesh and his ideas about marriage pinch her like sharp needles: "He [Mahesh] has been a polite stranger since our wedding. I can't help admiring his restraint, his detachment which views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other. It is a gamble, he says. But this he says in a vulnerable moment of intimacy. Otherwise he does not believe in talking about ifs and buts, at least not with his wife. All that spewing out of feelings is self-indulgent, he says. It is un-Indian." (Ibid: 1992: 49)

Devi has her own reservations and numerous questions crop up in her mind. She realizes that Mahesh has talked more than enough about his work, his busy schedule of work and about his company. She also reflects on the contingency of the institution of marriage which has settled deep into her psyche as a union of two souls and two bodies. A marriage is

a ritual, hence it cannot be forced into suddenly being there, it must grow gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling. Mahesh desires to settle into quietness as he considers marriage a business affair like any other. Now Devi is confronted with the overwhelming question: “Does he not see that it is too early for quietness? Too soon for the companionship of habit?” (Ibid: 1992: 49)

It is not surprising; therefore, that Devi's disillusionment with her married life starts to gain momentum. Being fed on her grandmother's stories of mythical women; she had conjured up an image of herself as a princess walking gracefully in the Swayamvara hall with all the prospective husbands sitting there. Her father-in-law, now a retired old person, was a professor of Sanskrit. He feeds her with the shlokas from classic Sanskrit texts, quoting the portions which define and illustrate a woman's role in the family and society. This has a revitalizing impact on her, strengthening her dreams of a life modeled after princesses and mythical women. He tells her stories which remind Devi of her grandmother's stories. In his intense moments, he supplements the quotes with explanations of classical Indian music and its ragas. This is particularly significant because Devi finally strays from the tradition-bound path of wifedom into the lure of music and falls in love with a musician Gopal, and the age-old wisdom enshrined in the Sanskrit texts which filters down to her through her father-in-law works to no effect. Hariharan's interest in the stories of all sorts finds a metaphorical, though not explicitly autobiographical, reflection on the nature and function of Baba's (her grandfather's) story: “Baba's stories remind me of my grandmother's, but they are also different. They are less spectacular, they ramble less. Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. They make one point in concise terms: that saints lived according to the laws of the time-tested tradition. His stories are never flabby with ambiguity, or even fantasy, a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife.” (Ibid: 1992: 51)

A year of Devi's marriage passes uneventfully with Mahesh busy in his tours and Mayamma running the house as usual. Devi comes to terms with reality and identifies her marriage and womanhood together. Her vision of marriage, as a coming together of two bodies and souls in perfect harmony and union begins to crumble. In fact, she feels distraught, not because she had formed a romantic notion of her marriage but because of the unconscious impact of her grandmother's stories in which she figured as a princess. Marriage seems to be sacrificial knife to Devi and she has begun to feel its cuts and pricks. Her appraisal of the worth of her own marriage is tinged with disillusionment and unfulfilment: “After the early rites of initiation, learnt on old knees, the skills perfected under the eye of a jealous mother; the token rebellion, a concession to youth this then is marriage, the end of

ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood.” (Ibid: 1992: 54)

It is obvious from the passage quoted above that Devi feels deprived of the joy which marriage brings about. Mahesh is practical and upwardly mobile, viewing marriage as a necessity. On the contrary, Devi has great expectations from marriage which remain unfulfilled on account of the matter-of-fact attitude and behavior on the part of Mahesh. Devi aspires to realize what she considers to be the real aims of marriage: sharing, caring, and togetherness leading to fulfillment. But the nature of Mahesh's job warrants upon him successive tours all the month long barring a few intervals when he visits as a 'shadowy stranger' depriving Devi of her identity. She is reduced to a mere body then and finds her womanhood completely ignored. For the rest of the month, she feels crushed with the weight of boredom. So she hints or rather suggests looking for some kind of a job. And the cool, even-tempered Mahesh advises that she might attend Tara's painting classes. Devi complies with this suggestion and finds Tara a bright, cheerful and energetic young woman who instills courage, confidence and a preparedness to learn among the five or six ladies who attend her painting classes.

As Mahesh is away for a sizeable part of every month, Devi feels alone. Despite of her attending Tara's classes at intervals, she finds this kind of socializing falls short of generating a real sense of togetherness. She plans many ways to dissipate her boredom and loneliness: “I would write letters, I would read the books Baba gave me. I would sweep my floors every night.... I would plan picnics under the acacia and laburnum trees when Mahesh was here.” (Ibid: 1992: 58) Her plans, however, fail to materialize giving her no respite from the ghost of loneliness. Instead, she embarks on a new enterprise; searching old cupboards. And she comes across a pile of old photographs among which she comes by the photograph of her mother-in-law Parvatamma. In curiosity, she asks Mahesh about his mother but he brushed aside her question with a simple remark that his mother was a good woman. His reply had an air of finality about it, prohibiting any further queries in the matter. Even her father-in-law, too, spoke about his wife to Devi only once.

It is Mayamma who tells Devi about Parvatamma. Mayamma briefly relates how Parvatamma took pity on her miserable and forsaken state. She gave Mayamma this house because Mayamma's husband, a wretch, had disappeared years ago. Parvati was an austere and religious woman who finally surrendered herself to the will of God, leaving her home, children and husband for good. After the children went away to boarding schools, she would spend more and more time in the puja room. She fasted; she did every puja that Mayamma

had heard of. Parvatamma sang bhajanas in her weak but pure voice. She finally decided to leave her home and family in search of God. Mayamma tells with pathos tinged with a profound sense of loss: "She walked out of the house, a small bag hanging on her shoulder, leaving me speechless. I felt destitute; I felt my mother had died again." (Ibid: 1992: 63)

This is, indeed, a rare example of the female bonding because Mayamma feels more attached to Parvatamma because of the motherly affection, care and the protection she had received from her godmother. Mayamma spoke to Devi for hours about Parvatamma, and through her narration Devi gathered more facts about her mother-in-law who had been loving, gentle and feminine. She was a woman whose generosity led her outward, away from herself. Devi compares her to her grandmother but finds that both the women were entirely different. Parvatamma remained an enigma. In contrast to Devi's grandmother, she had been more ambitious: "She had, like a man in a self-absorbed search for a god, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder." (Ibid: 1992: 64)

Alongside the discovery of these facts about Parvatamma, Devi's mind treads two paths: seeking a job for herself as a research assistant and listening to the views of Manu as enshrined in manusmriti about the role and duties of an Indian woman. The narrator is Baba, her father-in-law who recounts the life stories of saint-poets, devotees and saints such as Jayadeva and his wife Padmavati, Purandara Dasa, Narayan Tirth and Thyagaraja. These stories highlight the virtue of chastity, devotion and penance in the life of a human being. Baba summed up his illustrative stories with an ambitious conclusion: "By public confession, repentance, penance, repetition of holy mantras, and by gifts, the sinner is released from sin. That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance." (Ibid: 1992: 67)

The retired professor, whom Devi affectionately calls Baba, initiated her into the religious pantheon of Hindu mythology. But the luck does not favour her long as her Baba leaves for U.S.A. to live with his daughter. When Devi feels mortified with the fear of separation, he chides her in a firm and confident voice, a trait he had earned through years of learning and self-control. His simple advice was: "Whatever is dependent on others is misery' whatever rests on oneself is happiness; this in brief is the definition of happiness and misery." (Ibid: 1992: 68)

Thus the initiator leaves for New York never to return. He dies in New York and his body is flown to India to be cremated. In Baba's death, Devi suffers a loss which only adds to her current miseries. It is as if her loneliness and boredom in Mahesh's long absence were not burdensome enough to weigh down her spirits, Mahesh insisted on having a baby as soon as possible. Perhaps he realizes little that having a baby does not rest on one's choice. Things get worse as Devi is forced to visit a lady doctor for medical examination to ensure that everything is alright with her. She finds the expectations of Mahesh a bit too demanding. Her

misery is further compounded by the loneliness which continues to eat up the vitals of her being. To gain some relief from this demon of loneliness, Devi takes recourse to reading Baba's books, and comes by a page which Baba had left unread: "I read about a Kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its Kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a Kritya." (Ibid: 1992: 70)

Thus her acute loneliness gets two companions without Devi doing anything offensive. Baba's death has left her to face an awesome loneliness but she never forgets his words about the duties of a housewife. She finds her life useless and meaningless since her Baba deserted her, though she tries very hard to stay resigned in her loneliness and the resentment born out of it. However, one of Baba's legacies, music which kindled Devi's interest in it seems to offer her respite. She listens to the sounds of music wafting from her neighborhood in which the musician and the singer, Gopal had come to live. Her interest in the ragas of music gradually leads to an interest in the man himself. And a relationship began to grow which later entangles Devi with such force and tenacity that she abandons her marriage to be a free woman who challenged the stereotyped norms of genteel society. However, this crucial turn in her life will be examined as the narrative unfolds itself revealing not only the thousand faces of night but several stands, aspects and dimensions of a woman's passion for a man.

The Thousand Faces of Night has a unique feature of narrative inclusiveness which implies that several narratives are stitched into the texture of the main narrative without even slightly affecting its smooth movement. The inclusion of Annapurna's story in the second chapter of Part-II of the novel is a clear evidence of this narrative skill. A brief patch of Devi's memory reveals how Annapurna, a distant relative came to stay with her family when she lost her parents. Annapurna was playful, vibrant, open-minded and energetic. She had almost crossed pubescence. Devi's mother watched her carefully, jealously guarding against any sexual attraction on her husband's part. When she noticed some faint symptoms of sexual allurements from her husband's side, she dispatched the girl Annapurna, thus nipping in the bud a love affair which had been in its nascent stage. Perhaps Devi's father whom she calls Anna died in South Africa with the unfulfilled longing to have the raw but juicy taste of love with a young girl. It follows then that Anna, Devi's father, led a loveless married life which consumed him from within. Added to this frustration was his low-key profile because he lived under the shadowy of his austere wife who enforced strict discipline on him and Devi. On her part, too, Devi feels frustrated in the straitjacket of motherhood imposed on her by Mahesh, who considers that the singular aim of marriage is to beget children. Another significant reason for her straying into a love-affair may be her interest in the classical Indian music into which she was initiated by her late father-in-law. As Devi quite often dreams of

flying in the air, it is certainly an unconscious desire to flee the hard and unpleasant realities of life. The long absences of Mahesh intensify her loneliness and frustration. Mayamma's tale of her married life partly convinces Devi of the futility of marriage and motherhood both of which lose their glamour and attraction. She devises plans and strategies to dilute and dissipate her boredom, loneliness and frustration. Listening to Mayamma's account of her past tragic life brings about a kinship, a closeness which is a peculiar and exclusive trait among women - female bonding. Therefore, it is worthwhile, at this point, to unravel the tragic tale of Mayamma which highlights the fact of women's suffering in orthodox and tradition-bound Indian society. It unequivocally projects women as child-bearing instruments meant for advancing the family-line by giving birth to a male child.

Mayamma was married when she was twelve. She was one of the numerous sacrificial goats who were sacrificed on the altar of child-marriage, a phenomenon which was common in India till 1970s. Despite being thrust into the marriage-machine, Mayamma continued to lead the life of a dutiful wife. Her husband was a rake, a wretched fellow. She also ignored the catastrophe, her marriage, which imposed experience on the innocence of her childhood. She suffered the bestial sexuality of her husband and accepted it as her lot: "Mayamma recalls how her mother-in-law had examined her closely before the match was made. She had taken the girl aside and cross-questioned her about the jewellery she was wearing. Were they hers or her sister's? She tugged at Mayamma's long, thick plait to make sure it was all real. Unable to check Mayamma's insides herself, she had contented herself with the astrologer's promise that Mayamma would bear her many strong grandsons."(Ibid: 1992: 80)

The painful and agonizing tale of Mayamma's sufferings as a woman - both as a wife's mother and a daughter-in-law - does not end with the grateful evocation of the bond she had formed with Parvatamma. Hariharan has consciously allotted substantial space for the full expression of the silent cries which reappear through Mayamma's memories of the harrowing experience as a wife and as a mother. The second chapter of the third part of *The Thousand Faces of Night* unravels the web of her past life in her marital house. As mentioned above, she was constantly being ground in the torture-machine powered and run by her cruel, superstitious and insensitive mother-in-law. She inflicted inhuman torture on Mayamma for the only fault that she did not bear her a grandson very soon. But Mayamma never complained and meekly followed her orders. There is a reference to her mother-in-law's cruelty against the supposed flaw of barrenness in Mayamma who did whatever she was told and ordered in order that she might fulfill the role of a wife and mother. Mayamma never got freshly cooked rice to eat, and her mother-in-law was jealous and intolerant of her wearing a new sari, she bursts open with anger: "You have been admiring your fine new sari, have you, continued the mocking voice. What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch? She pulled up my sari roughly, just as he did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly

ground spices into barrenness. I burned, my thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails. The next time it was my breast. Cut the right one open, here, take this blade. Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam.” (Ibid: 1992: 113)

One can hardly find such instances of witch-like cruelty perpetrated on one woman by another woman. In a tradition-bound society like India, childlessness/barrenness is more than a curse to a woman who suffers from this misfortune. Sometimes women fail to bear children following some flaw in their husbands but only women are branded as barren and even an infertile husband stays free from the blame of barrenness/infertility. In fact, Mayamma's mother-in-law is the stereotype of the superstitious women who inflict cruel injuries on other women only to fulfill their whims and sham respectability. She subjects Mayamma to every possible torture for no fault of her own. Mayamma's husband, too, treated her roughly dallying with her as an object of his lustful passion during the late hours of the night. One can realize how her dreams of a contended wifehood were torn apart by his uncouth behavior: “He snorted like an angry bull. He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow. I was a silly little girl then, his grunting frightened me. If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with another. As she (her mother-in-law) kept me downstairs later and later at night, I ran up the staircase to a deafening silence. He would sneak in towards dawn, satiated with his carnal night in the fields, and draw me to himself with rough tenderness.” (Ibid: 1992: 118)

The secret elopement of Devi is disclosed very soon. Devi's mother, Sita (whom she referred to as Amma) receives the news from a cryptic telegram sent by Mahesh. Hariharan deliberately foregrounds Sita in the first chapter of Part 3 of the novel. It is here that the names of Devi's parents are revealed; Sita, the mother and Mahadevan, the father. Sita is depicted as a strong woman with strict discipline, self-control, resilience and mastery of household management. She brought up Devi with all possible care and precaution as Devi was a secretive child, a trait she shared with her father, Mahadevan. To a practical woman as Sita, her daughter's elopement comes as a rude shock but she keeps up her composure, appealing to Mahesh “No scandal please.” Sita has viewed life from very close angles, reading its contours and patterns with the intentness precision and care of a birdwatcher. Her garden spoke volumes of her skill, neatness and pointedness. When she lost her husband in Africa where he was working on a prestigious overseas assignment, she returned at once wasting no time. Even though she was offered help by the relatives, she politely refused. As a widow, she did not feel let down in the least but she rather forbore her calamity with steely courage and a sense of resigned determination: “Sita emerged from the taxi, a slim graceful figure, the hair graying a little about temples, but still beautiful, and impeccably dressed, in a deep blue Kanchipuram silk sari” (Ibid: 1992: 99)

The guiding mottoes of Sita's life were good housekeeping, good taste and hard work. Only Sita knew what relentless self-discipline had gone into the making of a perfect housekeeper, a blameless wife. Before she was married, she had spent much time and energy in the practice on veena. She had learnt to play improvised patterns of notes in perfect time leading to sensitive explorations into the characteristic subtleties and nuances of a raga. She translated her skill in music into the skill of managing the household. Economy, ambition and management in household affairs became the mantras of her life. She led her husband from one promotion to another promotion till he became a full-fledged class one officer. For the sake of her wifedom and family, she sacrificed her love of music, avoiding even visits to her parental home. She hated all illusion, regardless of what form it assumed. She knew what illusion was; she had seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of her soul when she broke the strings of her veena.

Sita was meticulous, fastidious and strong-willed. She could, and did rule with an iron hand. She thought for all three of them (Mahadevan, Devi and herself); and when she could do so without offending propriety, she acted for them, swiftly decisively, and above all, unobtrusively. Her reign did not always run a smooth course; there were little challenges in plenty. Both Devi and Mahadevan had grown into the sly, shifty-eyed accomplices of a mutiny that threatened to erupt through books, daydreams, gods and goddesses, secret corners, the innocent (and therefore more dangerous) sensuality of a stranger like Annapurna.

She quelled these phantoms of rebellion with master-strokes: she banished all the gods and goddesses to their rightful place.... She sent Annapurna, well provided, her fascination blunted by her gratitude. Then she swept out dark corners, quiet afternoons, and mystical books. One she packed off to Africa on a prestigious overseas assignment.... The other [Devi] was sent to America for higher education.

However, she forgot an important piece of wisdom; that things and people strained beyond their measure ultimately fall apart. This happened with Mahadevan also as he died of a heart-attack caused by the excessive strain. In the like manner, her daughter's dreamy nature controlled and dammed by the mother's discipline gives in at length for she abandons the promises and duties of wifedom so meticulously taught to her by Sita and runs away with Gopal. Notwithstanding her apparent resolve to be matter-of-fact and practical like her husband, Mahesh, Devi fails to overcome myth-laden world of her dreams and plunges into the illusion of music created by Gopal. There were other factors to precipitate her fall and descent into the make-believe world of Gopal: Mahesh's long absences, her loneliness and frustration and the tragic life-history of Mayamma which reduced the ideals of wifedom and motherhood to a mockery of female identity/womanhood.

For an accomplished, practical and successful woman like Sita, life appeared almost as an entirety. But, in contrast, Devi's life seems to her disorganized and fragmented. What

she lacked was her mother's resilience, the caliber of making sacrifices and a sense of resignation amidst the turbulence of stress and pressures caused by the violence of feelings. Sita could exercise a masterly control on her feelings, taking odds and hurdles in her stride but her daughter Devi could not; for she was a dreamy woman, away from practical reality.

After her years of self-discipline, care and endless sacrifices, Sita was not prepared for an unexpected betrayal. She was shocked beyond measure when she received a terse telegram from Mahesh: "Devi has run away. Letter follows. All necessary action being taken." This message filled Sita with shock and anger. She sat all day long in the patio, brooding over the phrase in the telegram 'necessary action being taken.' She wondered whether Mahesh really knew what was necessary in such a situation. Her anger exploded with the force and intensity of a volcano when she received Mahesh's letter containing the lurid details of betrayal. She feels robbed of her life-time achievement: "So this was what she reaped after years of sacrifices years of iron-like self-control. After all those quarrels with her husband about discipline for a growing child, won through silent, ferocious struggles, and sleepless nights of thorough, between-the-lines planning, and best of possible lives had been offered to her daughter. And what had Devi done in return? She had torn her respectability, her very name, to shreds. And for what prize? A year or two wallowing in the arms of an illusory lover, in a den of riff-raff; then total, abject degradation, the slime and filth of an uprooted woman's decay." (Ibid: 1992: 108)

Seen through the practical and searching vision of Sita, Devi's search for an independent identity and her quest for womanhood are not only absolutely illusory and foolish but also degrading and defiling. No doubt, Sita's prophetic musings on the worst fate of Devi begin to take a realistic shape. Having been a part of Gopal's entourage for months, Devi has begun to tread the road where she will learn to be a sadder and wiser woman. Both Gopal and his music have been steadily losing their aura and luster: "His music was no longer a distant call, romantic because unknown, magnetic because her own experience was so splintered and light-weight." (Ibid: 1992: 127)

As Devi came to know Gopal more intimately, her romantic effusion and attraction began to wear out in bits and parts. She found Gopal a willful and uninhibited individual. She knew the man now, but still she did not understand his music. Just as she had known Mahesh's bitterness about the fatherhood that escaped him, but not the source of that atavistic yearning for a descendant. She is enmeshed by the coils of her own making: she felt enchanted by Gopal's music but she was completely disillusioned with Gopal the man. She had learnt enough about her status by the way she was treated in Gopal's household and by the sly overtures of friendship his pupils made behind Gopal's back. The unpleasant and bitter truth stared her in the face; she was nothing more than an adulteress and Gopal's mistress. Though she wishes to leave him, her fascination with Gopal's music keeps her in the

company. There is a fierce struggle between her disenchantment and her desire to defy the society of men: “She felt like an ignorant child imprisoned in a woman's body, displaying, like a badge, her rebellious, independent spirit. But she cowered inside, planning in furtive dread, while another, more defiant self, grasped, filled itself with odd, exotic and futile knick-knacks of experience. But this bold adventuress soon floundered; and struggled blindly to bring herself to a standstill.” (Ibid: 1992: 128)

Of the three women, Mayamma's story of her married life is an unbroken passage of suffering and endurance. She had been thrust into the vortex of marriage at the tender age of twelve when she was hardly able to comprehend the meaning, purpose and the duties of womanhood/ wifehood. What she learnt about was lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, firsthand. Both her husband and her mother-in-law unleashed their cruelties and tortures in their own inhuman ways. Despite being subjected to misery, Mayamma had coveted birth (motherhood) endured life and nursed death (her ailing son who died). Though she sulks and feels sad, she has no bitterness. And she had, from the very start, a strong desire to live, to survive. This is why she could live again through Parvatamma, and even through Devi. It is through Mayamma, the old family retainer that Devi discovers a crucial fact of her life: the key to marriage is the ability to endure.

It seems that Hariharan knows what it means to be a writer. Like Shashi Deshpande, Hariharan feels uncomfortable with being described as a ‘woman writer’ and finds this term limiting. When asked about being pegged as a specialist in 'women's issues', Hariharan responded:

There are two questions here. Am I a writer particularly concerned with 'women's issues'? And am I a feminist? The answer to both questions is yes. I want to make it quite clear that in my life choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. I want to say this because many women are very anxious for some reason to say "I'm a humanist, not a feminist." that sort of thing. . . .We can't be wary of the word 'feminist' because there are people in the world who misunderstand the word or have done disservice to the word- you can't use most words then! Any anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. And this goes for both men and women. So the answer to this question would be that I am a writer (as opposed to a woman writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things.... one of the first lessons you learn as a writer is that there's some sort of truth, some sort of fidelity to the character.(anothersubcontinent.com)

Besides adhering to the principle of fidelity in the representation of truth/reality, Hariharan believes that being a feminist does not amount to the fact that her novels will be feminist manifestoes. In the same interview referred to above, she has clarified her stance:

Exactly, being a writer and a feminist doesn't mean that you write tracts and pretend they are novels. I was not writing a blueprint. I wish I could-then I would not be a useless novelist but doing something much more useful. But I didn't/don't have a blue print. As for being a 'woman writer' I would say such a label is legitimate or useful only if it is used with some rigour. It is useful to study women's writing and Dalit writing and so on in an academic context. I don't think it is terribly useful if the labels become lazy, a way to ghettoize. (anothersubcontinent.com)

To Hariharan, gender is both a vital issue and formidable question which needs to be resolved and for which not only women writers, but women in general must make a concerted effort. She has, outside of her work as a writer, participated in gender politics in Indian society in a very engaged way and reaped fruits of her industrious exercise. She tells that she always feels nervous about answering questions regarding gender and women's lives at least partially at personal level. The reason is quite simple; she does not want to make it seem that she does more than she actually does. She has further explained her position: "But certainly, all my adult life, I have been involved in some way or the other-often in modest ways - in the activities of women's groups, secular cultural groups, anti-nuclear groups. The guardianship case in the Supreme Court was just the most visible. I also write as often as I can about some of these issues" (anothersubcontinent.com).

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