



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Concept of 'Changed Woman' in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Ms. Sumaila Raza¹, Dr. Md. Equebal Hussain²

1. Researcher, Department of English, B.R. Ambedkar Bihar University,
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India.
2. Associate Professor, Department of English, M.S. College, Motihari, Bihar,
India.

Abstract

Githa Hariharan in her very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) has got the opportunity to interact with the readers of English literature. This award winning novel revolves around women's predicament in contemporary India and along with delineating the pitiable condition of women. She has introduced the concept of 'Changed Woman' or 'New Woman'. This concept is a progeny of Post-colonial era or in other apt words we can say that post-colonialism is the mother of this new concept. It brought a revolutionary change in the world of English literature and Indian English literature too did not remain untouched with this very concept. Now the image of women is entirely changed. She is no more a weeping statue but a lady with firm decision and bold character. Before proceeding to further discussion at first we should

know what does this term mean. The term 'Changed Woman' is used for self-awakening of woman and for realization of her place and position in the orbit of family and then in the society.

Keywords

'New Woman'; 'Changed Woman'; Githa Hariharan; *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

◆

Githa Hariharan in her very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) has got the opportunity to interact with the readers of English literature. This award winning novel revolves around women's predicament in contemporary India and along with delineating the pitiable condition of women. She has introduced the concept of 'Changed Woman' or 'New Woman'. This concept is a progeny of Post-colonial era or in other apt words we can say that post-colonialism is the mother of this new concept. It brought a revolutionary change in the world of English literature and Indian English literature too did not remain untouched with this very concept. Now the image of women is entirely changed. She is no more a weeping statue but a lady with firm decision and bold character. Before proceeding to further discussion at first we should know what does this term mean. The term 'Changed Woman' is used for self-awakening of woman and for realization of her place and position in the orbit of family and then in the society.

The Changed Woman or 'New Woman' had its origin in West and can be traced right from the plays of Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw. Shakespeare's heroines like Olivia and Rosalind and Shaw's Candida are all images of the 'New Woman'. This portrayal of the liberated woman gained popularity down the ages through the woman writers and its forerunners were Jane Austen, the Bronte Sisters and George Eliot.

This concept of 'New Woman' and its definition of self-identity were introduced into Indian English literature in the post-independent era. It spells a refreshing break from the mythological stereotype image of the past. This term has given a new definition and meaning to the selfhood of woman with a strong realization about her individuality and merit.

The image of New Woman was pioneered in Indian English literature by Kamala Das. Before this concept a woman faced several sorts of restrictions and her freedom was curtailed by patriarchal ideologies. Even literature too was not untouched with this limitation in portraying women characters. It was during this period that Kamala Das dared to expose the crude realities of society and its treatment and outlook towards women. Das through her writing tried to reveal the extent to which a woman can go for the fulfillment of her desires and realization of her selfhood. This new portrayal of the Indian women who were previously typecast only in the mould of Sati - Savitri by other literary artists saw a new presentation by Das. It is this static, conformist depiction of the Indian woman that Das has contested and defied candidly and out rightly. With the discovery of the self and the assertion of selfhood, she transcends all the barriers of culture, tradition and patriarchy. Her woman personas are restless individuals struggling to establish a distinct identity in the traditionally male-dominated society. She voices through her protagonists women's fervent protest against the absurd constraints forced on them and insists on the need for the Indian womanhood. She dared to break the prevalent ideologies that surrounded women and came up strongly with a new breed of literature and women characters. She blatantly refused to be bogged down by the women archetype and created the 'New Indian Woman' in her literature in quest of her individuality and independence.

The 'Changed Woman' in postcolonial Indian English fiction has become conscious of her individuality and has been trying to assert her rights as human being. She seems to be engaged in constant fight with man for equality.

Since long a woman's silent suffering and upholding of Indian cultural values have been glorified in Indian fiction. So far woman, devoid of her own identity has been destined to play so many roles in her life like the role of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter and so many relations. Never has she been thought of as an individual apart from being merely a cog in the family machine. She is deprived of her identity. Her place is ever estimated as secondary. She has remained just a puppet in the hand of male. Naturally women are oppressed and feel themselves suffocated in such environment and want to set themselves free from the shackles of tradition based society. The New woman now wants her own identity in the family and society. She does not want to remain slave to the aspirations and dreams of her family on either side – her parents and her in-laws.

No doubt women writers have added a new dimension to the post - colonial Indian English fiction. Their feminine sensibility has led them to break new ground in Indian English fiction marked by a movement from the outer to the inner world. They have created their own world filled with extraordinary sensitive beings. Women writers of Indian English fiction have endeavoured a lot to exhibit the eternal quest of their female characters for a meaningful life. The journey of Indian English women novelists has reached to a point where women appear in their new avatar with their independent view point about man, society and life. The 'Changed Woman' resents and refuses to be put under the oppressive restrictions imposed upon her by tradition. Her education and economic independence have brought tremendous change in her outlook on conjugal relationship and her attitude towards love, marriage and sex. Woman novelists writing in English in postcolonial period have projected woman in the lead role. They probe deep into woman's psyche. Post-colonial Indian English women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nayan Tara Sahgal, Kamala Das, are pioneers of 'Changed Woman'.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* looks at a renewed conceptualization of the 'Changed Woman'. It celebrates the concept of 'New Woman' and attempts to create a new paradigm for the recreation of woman's identity. It is believed that in this patriarchal system women are supposed to be destined to be oppressed and reside an isolated life but Githa Hariharan seeks other solutions that propose rejuvenation and joy in a set of different circumstances that subvert existing social patterns and values. She makes her female characters feel like breathing new and fresh air.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the suppressed role of women makes the protagonist Devi question herself about her own identity. She wants to know what she is without a man. She does not want to be a reflection of a man and in the end of the novel she rejects the patriarchal system and empowers herself by giving a new concept of womanhood.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a narration of three women Mayamma, Devi and Sita. These three women stand for three generations and three ideas. Their concept about life does not match with one another. Thus while Mayamma represents traditional Indian woman, Devi represents modern contemporary woman and Sita is a bridge between these two concepts i.e. tradition versus modernity. So in this feminist novel we have a fine shade of these three colours. J. Yellaiah and G Pratima hold:

[The novelist] sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. [The novelist] diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find, through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality ... this dichotomy is approached by women exercising their choice adhering to the construct with unflinching loyalty in earlier times and daring to cross the barrier in the changed context. (188)

Mayamma, Devi and Sita are of different categories in terms of education and status. Mayamma is the caretaker of Mahesh's family. She is a traditional woman who suffers all the afflictions of family and society. She is tortured both psychologically and physically. Her husband hits, slaps, kicks, beats and indulges in non-consensual sexual activity. She is the worst sufferer of all and accepts her fate without any complaint. Married at a tender age of twelve, her innocent childhood is nipped in the bud. Unfortunately, she fails to bear child and incurs the wrath of her mother-in-law. She does penance for ten years and at length is blessed with a son. But her son too is as bad as her husband. He is a replica of his father. He beats Mayamma. Broken emotionally her patience gives way to silent sullen protest. At last her son dies. As a mark of final protest "She burns her horoscope with her son" (82). From here onwards her search for some meaning into survival starts. She finds refuge in the house of Parvatamma, Devi's mother-in-law and works there as a retainer of the house though Mayamma could not do much for herself. So she does not present the concept of 'Changed Woman'.

Next character Sita too does not fit well in the frame of the concept of 'Changed Woman' because she too suffers all the difficulties silently. She changes herself wholly for her family. As her name so is her character. She is married to Mahadevan. She is a good veena player and her ambition is to be a great veena player but after marriage all her dreams are shattered because her in-laws want an expert housewife not a talented veena player. Once her father-in-law admonishes her for neglecting her duties and questions, "Are you a Wife, a daughter-in-law" (30). These lines are so heart rendering that she decides never to touch the veena again and finally becomes a responsible wife and dutiful daughter-in-law. Resigned to fate she says, "Yes I am wife, a daughter in law" (30). After this incident, no one saw her touching the veena again because she made her heart understand that she is a woman and her primary duty is her family and family only. She knows very well that a woman does not

have her own existence. She is merely a shadow who remains stuck to her father before marriage and again with her husband after marriage and at the last stage of her life with her son. Sita saw her femininity as an “illusion and so she seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of her soul till the enticing stems of the seven-noted scale came apart, broken and disharmonious in a cluster of pathetic twangs” (105). She forgets herself in managing her husband and his family. “Good house-keeping, good taste, hard work” (101) are her guiding mottoes. Sita is such a, “Woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifices without fanfare” (103).

Another character Devi, who is the protagonist of this novel introduces the concept of ‘Changed Woman’. Devi, a young Indian girl returns from America to Madras after obtaining a degree in Post-Graduation she is welcomed by her mother Sita very cordially and like a traditional and dutiful mother she starts searching a suitable match for her daughter and arranges a Swayamvar. After rejecting 5-6 suitors she is finally wedded to Mahesh, a regional manager in a multinational company. After completion of wedding ceremony she goes to her husband’s house. Being a husband and wife they live like strangers in their own house. Most of the time Mahesh is away from home on long tours for business purposes. So, Devi has to live without him. His absence tortures her. But even when he returns his behavior is very cold and unromantic towards her wife. She longs for her husband’s love which is absent in her married life. Indeed for a woman, husband’s love and care is more valuable than materialistic things.

Mahesh and Devi’s ideas about marriage are quite contrary. Mahesh does not believe in any kind of harmony between husband and wife. He views marriage as “a necessity, a milestone like any other. It is gamble” (49). For Mahesh marriage is only a need and it has nothing to do with love, care, concern, harmony, belief, mutual trust and emotional support and thinks that “Indians are not obsessed with love” (55). Devi’s thought regarding marriage is

beyond the understanding of Mahesh's view. She believes marriage "a delicate but promising sapling which doesn't grow instantly but gradually" (49). Infact, Devi's view about marriage is quite rational. No doubt marriage is a kind of seed which our parents give us when we grow up and then it is a duty of a husband and wife to plant and irrigate it with love and care. Marriage that lacks these things withers away very soon. Thus, Devi wants her husband's love but Mahesh's indifferent behavior shatters her dream. Even Mahesh does not lose any chance of ridiculing her. Once she expresses her desire to learn Sanskrit. At this Mahesh tells her that what she will do with all this highbrow knowledge. He believes that women have nothing to do with this high class language. Their duty is to do household work only. In one of the instances, Mahesh is getting ready for his trip and Devi requests him to postpone it. Pat come Mahesh's reply, "Why don't I pray to be born a woman in my next birth", "then I won't have to make a living at all" (54).

Mahesh does not leave any chance to ridicule Devi. Every time she is underestimated and mentally tortured by him. Devi comes to realize that marriage is only

a sacrificial knife 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 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 games it plays with me are ignominious ... The heart I have prepared so well for; its demands remain untouched unsought for. (54)

Devi admits her limitations, "My education has left me unprepared for the ways yawning middle chapters of my woman hood" (54). Really, the path of woman is not easy and smooth. Devi's father-in-law says, "The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear ... who have practiced self control" (55).

Devi is totally disgusted with Mahesh's behavior. She is a romantic individual while Mahesh is very matter-of-fact type of young man. He never speaks a single affectionate word about Devi. His insensitiveness and inability to understand her shocks her and gives rise to a feeling of awesome loneliness in her. She becomes aware of the insignificant and secondary status assigned to her by her husband. Devi wants to realize her 'Self'; she does not want to remain a wife but to possess her own individual identity.

Devi represents the present day intellectually strong woman with a different vision to perceive life around her and she confronts her loneliness and alienation with courage. She would like to become "a woman warrior, a heroine" who "rode a tiger and cut off evil magical demons heads" (41).

She realizes that there is no point in continuing her meaningless life with Mahesh but still she tries best at her level to compromise with Mahesh but all her efforts goes in vain. After an act of perseverance and silence Devi walks out from the life of Mahesh which gave meaning to her life and she took it as her 'First real journey' (Rao 161). At this juncture she is attracted to Gopal a musician and falls in love with him because unlike Mahesh this man is very caring towards her. She develops a live-in-relation with Gopal. Initially Devi's relationship with Gopal is warm and affectionate and to some extent he succeeds in giving what Mahesh lacks. But the moment he lifts his mask Devi discerns that he is no better than Mahesh. He and she belong to two different worlds – 'he' from the light and 'she' from the darkness; 'he' from the popular world 'she' from the unpopular world. When Devi comes into relationship with Gopal she hopes "to soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas ..." (95) but very soon life with Gopal begins to seem like "a kite that had snapped free of its string" (129). So, unfortunately both Mahesh and Gopal fail to perceive her emotions and soul. She leaves Gopal too while he was in deep sleep. Devi's act of renunciation of both her husband and her lover shows a 'strong face of changed woman.' Now Devi does not want to remain a shadow of male figures.

Like her mother and Mayamma she does not compromise with the worse situation. She feels entrapped in the marital bond and senses. “Her freedom being thwarted, the gaping emptiness threatening her very existence” (Indra 178).

Having failed to define her identity within the framework of the male oriented social structures, Devi finally walks towards her mother “to stay and fight, to make sense of it all” (139). In fact the decision to stay with mother for a married daughter is not an easy task because our typical Indian society does not give permission to do so because staying of married daughter with her mother is considered to be a blot but still Devi dares to take such a step by breaking the old norms of this conservative Indian society and in this way she becomes a beacon light for the modern Indian woman and in real sense becomes the Devi of the concept of ‘Changed Woman’.

Works Cited

- Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.
- Indira, S. “Walking the Tight Rope: A Reading of Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*.” *Indian Woman Novelists, Set.III, Vol.4*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Prestige 1995. Print.
- Rao, K Damodar. “Penance as Multiple Response in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*.” *Indian Woman Novelists Set III: Vol. 4*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995.
- Yellaiah, J, and G Pratima. “‘Inside and Out There’: Male Constructs and Female Choices in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*.” *Kalkatiya Journal of English Studies* 23 (2003):188-95. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Raza, Sumaila, and Md. Equebal Hussain . “Concept of ‘Changed Woman’ in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*.” *Literary Quest* 2.6 (2015): 1-11. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.