Chapter – IV

Social Realism in The Thousand Faces of Night

The third novel, Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night (1993), revolves around women’s predicament in contemporary India. Along with, the long history of women’s subjugation is shown with an alternative analysis of myths that have been having a considerable impact on Indian psyche. The protagonist gradually becomes aware of their suppressive nature and discards them. The discussion of myths in the novel is so much substantial that S Ramanathan considers the novel as the “commemoration of Indian mythology”. He says that while contemporary women writers talk about the contemporary women’s problems in love, sex and marriage with greater confidence; Githa Hariharan articulates these themes with the help of Indian Mythology. Kader Aki also considers that in the novel myths are revisited, rewrote, and retold from a female point of view in order to focus the inner lives and spaces of women. Likewise, while for C Vijayasree, Hariharan uses the myths in process of net-working women of different ages and generations (177); for Urmila Verma, the novel demonstrates how the religious sayings, anecdotes, words of
wisdom uttered by old people, expressed through various rituals, religious rites and customs, emphasize the acceptance of woman’s traditional role (101).

The novel reserves the entire space to discuss exclusively the issues related to women. Discussing the theme of the novel Bindu Jacob writes:

[The novel] can be aptly defined as the several faces of thought presented by Githa Hariharan about the central theme – the struggle and predicaments of women in Indian society. The central theme is categorized as the quest for identity, penance, female bonding, marriage, chaos and dilemma by the rebellious protagonist Devi. (81)

Similarly, 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)

But, the novel is different from other Indian English fictions in its treatment of the subject matter. While other Indian English novels delineate women’s misery in a traditional ways, novel also deals with the women who are not apparently physically tortured but bear deep pangs on their psychology. The
novel aims to present the inner lives of women and tries to dissect the confined social structure which does not accept women’s role apart from the traditional role. It subjects women of three successive generations to show that the legacy of suffering is all alike. They may hold different different social position, but within the walls of the house, they have the same situation. Every next generation is considered more advanced than the previous generation, but every generation is destined to be the victim of sick social structure which works against weaker sections of the society. Showing her disappointment on this sordid fact Tripti Garg says:

[T]he novel causes the reader’s encounter with the truth that how so ever the female get educational capacities, how so ever the society may become modernized; but the females will be exploited in all the ages and their condition will remain as stagnant as it was years ago during the mythical age. (61)

The novel opens with the last few days of Devi in America. She is coming back to India after completing her post-graduation from there.

Commenting on the opening of the novel Antonia Navarro Tejero holds that Hariharan uses this strategy of distance to suggest an experience that will fall into oblivion because the life forthcoming is antagonistic to the one has lived in exile (90). Although Devi is a little troubled to leave the place but, at the same
time, she feels excited and nostalgic for her native place, Chennai (Madras).

While she anticipates about India, she makes a comparison between her nation and America. She recollects her childhood days. In every summer vacation, she visited her village house with her parents where her grandmother lived alone.

Devi’s wizened old grandmother acquainted her with many beliefs and rituals. This was the first place where she started seeing the role, importance, and influence of rituals. These rituals started from the moment they entered into the house and continued until they left the place. The influence of village experience did not end with her return; instead, it has been with her during her stay abroad. Under the influence of her childhood mythological stories she has developed an aspiration to be like the women of the stories, because of which she remained an “unmixable mix” there.

Devi’s actual trial begins with her arrival at Madras. Aspiring for her daughter a bright future, Sita, Devi’s mother, arranges a swayamvara (a ceremony to select a bridegroom). All this fascinates Devi. She has heard about it in her grandmother’s childhood stories. She recalls the stories which have exercised a great influence on her innocent mind. The stories were full of women characters that develop an interest in girl’s mind. Every story was with
a lesson for her. She recalls: “my grandmother laid out for me the feast of a bride’s choice the regal dignity and solemnity of swayamvara” (Hariharan 18).

Grandmother told that in ancient age, brides had the liberty to choose bridegrooms of their choice. For this purpose, marriageable kings and princes from all different parts of the country were invited on a single day. She further mentions:

In my grandmother’s stories, there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending. No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own homemade yardsticks for life.

(Hariharan 20)

Her first story was of princess Damyanti who got her heart’s desire despite all the efforts made by gods to make her selects any one of them instead of King Nala. Another was of Gandhari, who met her fate alone and accepted a blind husband. Another was of Amba, who was kidnapped by Bheeshma from her swayamvara, at the time when “her garland had almost encircled the neck of the man she had chosen.” Later, she took revenge on Bheeshma by becoming the cause of his death. The consequence of the stories was so great that, Devi created her fantasy world where she imagined herself as “an incarnation of
Durga, walking the earth to purge it of fat jowled slimy-tailed greed” (43).

According to Nilufer E Bharucha, “this is a feminist fantasy of decimating exploitative men – an Amazonian desire to inhabit autonomous spaces outside male-ordained enclosures” (102).

Initially these stories were only source of interest for Devi. But gradually she got aware of a pattern and similarity amid the tales and the story of real character around her. She realized that the anecdotes were not simple; instead, they were charged with lessons for her. She says:

My grandmother’s stories were no ordinary bed-time 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 illustration discovered, and a moral to be drawn out. Like the sugar shapes she made for me, a rich, over-sweet syrup that was magically transformed over the fire into ornamented little elephants, swans with each feather delicately etched, her stories fashioned moulds. Ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors. (27)

The grandmother always extorted either a comparison or a contrast between stories of tales and real characters. She always had a parallel from both worlds.
Perhaps through this correspondence she wanted to express that human civilization might be moving forward but women’s condition and expectations from them have not been changed.

During her stay in the village one day while playing in the house Devi found her mother’s photograph holding a *veena* in her hands. She asked grandmother about it. She was surprised to know that she could play but she had never seen her playing it. In her reply to the question of Devi and the reason why Sita stopped it, grandmother told her story of Gandhari from the great epic the *Mahabharata*. Gandhari is married to a blind man, but she is unaware about it. The revelation of this harsh truth on the first night of her marriage makes her shocked and furious. In her fury she makes a vow and tears off a piece of cloth and ties it over her eyes for the whole life. She chooses blindness by her choice. The grandmother summed up this end as appropriate for Gandhari’s majestic blood. In her appraisal she stated: “Gandhari was not just another wilful, proud woman, she embraced her destiny a blind husband with a self sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (Hariharan 29). Through a twisty route, the grandmother finally came back to Sita’s photograph. She told that her mother was an excellent *veena* player. After getting married to
Mahadevan, her father, she made proud her husband’s house too. Everything was going well, but one day seeing pooja room in a mess her father-in-law got furious and said, “[P]ut that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (Hariharan 30) His complaint jolted her to stop following her passion. She pulled stings out of the wooden base. It was her way of protest. In order to prove that she was a dutiful wife, she stopped playing veena. Grandmother told, “[W]e never saw her touch the veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised, and our household never heard that heart rending music again” (Hariharan 30). Devi was quick enough to sense a pattern and similarity between Gandhari and her mother’s stories. She said nothing, but she realised that “Gandhari’s pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering, was no piece of fiction. Gandhari’s anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a lifelong blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to [herself]” (Hariharan 29). Gandhari rebelled, but silently. Similarly, Sita made her fury her life force. She abandoned the playing veena and never touched it again and became an obedient daughter-in-law the neighbours praised.
Both the cases present a deep rooted and all pervasive social reality of India; i.e. a loyal wife and daughter-in-law is only one who sacrifices her passion and puts her domestic duties on priority. Sita became what others expected from her, that too at the cost of her own passion and individuality. This all happened because Sita was a bride in a Hindu family in which she was expected to perform some of the heaviest household chores, which may mean getting up well before dawn and working till late at night, and that too without any complaint. Observing her predicament K Damodar Rao writes:

[I]n a dominant patriarchal society like India, it is not uncommon to see women, pitted against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against themselves resulting in self-inflicted wounds and penance. This in itself is a resultant factor of the realization of the impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliations on them. This ‘hostility against oneself’ is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the Mahabharata. (160)

Another story the grandmother picked to display the resemblance between legendary and mundane women characters is of Amba. Amba was kidnapped from her swayamvara by Bheeshma, a celibate – “[whose] vow of celibacy pricked [him] like an old scar that flares at the touch of teasing flame” (Hariharan 38). After being kidnapped by him, she did not dare to go to her
father’s as, “a woman without a husband has no home.” When she realized that she could get help neither from the king, she had chosen as her husband, nor from her kidnapper who first separated her from her husband and later refused to accept her as his wife, she decided to take revenge from him because it was he who had ruined her life. In order to take vengeance Amba practiced meticulous penance, took many births and finally became the cause of his death. Grandmother drew a resemblance between Amba and Uma, who was a motherless girl. Everybody in the locality helped her in getting married. But unfortunate Uma could not enjoy her fate very long and returned to her home after a year. The marriage which was earlier considered by people a kind of opportunity that would bring a new dawn of fortune, later proved a curse for her. Her husband and father-in-law were drunkard. Though she had an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother but she was not prepared for this situation at all. Her experience in new home was worse than she had in her home. But the most apprehensive thing which happened to her that led her to leave the place was her father-in-law’s lecherous behaviour. Uma returned and lived with grandmother till the old woman died.
Through both the stories it can be easily drawn that, regardless of their status in the society, women have been the worst sufferer throughout the ages.

Both the characters, despite the fact that they hailed from different ages and different strata of society, corresponded to the plight of women. Male hypocrisy and patriarchy played a significant role in their painful lives.

Presenting a typical example of male dominance Bheeshma, a self-proclaimed celibate, kidnapped the princesses for his stepbrother. He did it with the intention that the girls would bore the royal house the strong warrior-sons. But, thereafter, he got that Amba, one of the princesses, had given her heart to king Salwa. This disclosure urged him to allow her go to the king of her choice: “go Amba, go where you will. Be a faithful wife to the man you have chosen” (Hariharan 37). But, to her shock King Salwa refused to accept her. Being rejected she returned to Bheesma, who showed his helplessness because of his vow of celibacy. Though, both of them boast for their strength and righteousness, their hypocrisy is very much apparent. If, on the one hand, Bheesma devastated her life but could not set it right; on the other, King Salwa, who did not protect her at the time of her abduction, rejected her on her return boasting that a king did not accept a woman won by someone else (Hariharan
Thus, both the cases clearly reflect how the women, in every age and in each section of the society have been suffering for male hypocrisy.

Though, the grandmother always tried to seek a common pattern between mythical and contemporary characters; yet, she could not always find a precise mythology equivalent for the puzzling experience of the people. The protagonist observed that the lesser lives around her did not always rise to the heroic proportion of the old woman’s version of Gandhari’s sacrifice. In this group was Gauri, the maidservant, who got married to a man; but was not happy with her husband and fell in love with her brother-in-law. Her act infuriated everyone. The reason of the people’s fury was that Gauri should be happy with her husband no matter how he treated her. To their consideration she broke social norms by showing dislike for her husband and fleeing with her brother-in-law. In the answer to Gauri’s story grandmother narrated a tale in which a woman gave birth to a snake. Since both parents waited for very long for a son they were happy and brought up the snake with all love and affection. One day seeing her child a full grown snake the mother suggested her husband to get married her son. The poor went in search of an appropriate bride for his son. Eventually he succeeded in finding a beautiful wife for his son. While the
people sympathized with the bride’s fortune, she refused their consideration: “a
girl is given only once in marriage.” She entered into her husband’s home and
after some time she got amazed with the miracle that her snake husband turned
into a handsome man. People held that with her devotion she has changed her
husband’s fate. The story has a very clear-cut message that like the bride Gauri
too should have accepted her fate and with her devotion changed her husband’s
nature. These cases also show the society’s expectation from women that they
should be docile and should unquestionably accept whatever is given to them
by the society. The other harsh reality that Gauri’s incident raises is dowry
system in Indian society. A girl is welcomed and respected in her companion’s
home only if she brings with her a lot of wealth and property. If she fails to do
so, she is humiliated, tortured, burnt and even killed by her husband and his
family. She suffers all this because of not dowry. Her worth is evaluated on the
monetary basis. Her intelligence, hard working and devotion all are ignored for
a single reason. All her merits are valued only if it is added on with big dowry.

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. Meanwhile she was sent
to America in order to pursue her higher education. Being influenced respectively by both the traditional as well as modern culture, on her return to India, she finds it hard to adjust. Along with the mythical characters, her mother Sita also has left a deep impression on her mind. The novel informs that she has always been different, and her talent and her unfeminine determination have set her apart from the other female characters in the novel. She lives alone in a big and old house. She wants everything to be perfect, disciplined and meticulously done or whatever way she wishes things to be. Good housekeeping, good taste, and hard work are told to be her guiding mottos (Hariharan 101). She is interested in gardening and her home-garden gives the impression of her personality – everything at right place and in right position. The setting of the garden suggests that she does not allow any kind of rebellion against her be it of plants or of people. She handles everything with the same whip. Devi, her daughter, also is tamed by her. Sita draws an analogy between both Devi and a clinging creeper: “both are young and tender and eager to be led in the right direction.” Both, the garden and her daughter, are what she wants them to be. After her husband’s death, she felt devastated and did not know what to do. While even the relatives wanted to take advantage, she summoned the courage and decided to run her life herself. After the completion
of Devi’s education she arranges for her marriage. She considers the prospective husbands and short-lists them and finally selects Mahesh for her daughter. She takes it as a sort of mission and assumes that her daughter is not mature enough to take the decisions regarding her own life because she is young.

According to her mother’s plan she is married to Mahesh, a manager in a company, which makes detergent. She is rather confused over the issue to accept Mahesh as her husband. She seems neither happy nor unhappy with the decision. T Sarada says:

[It happens because Devi] lacks the courage to boldly dash out with a man of her choice. From the beginning she is sure of the fact that her marriage with Mahesh might not provide the type of intellectual companionship that she expects. Therefore, even after a month of their marriage, Mahesh still seems an alien to her.

(59)

However, she goes with her husband to live in a big house. Initially Devi is happy with Mahesh’s behaviour. She admires “his restraint, his detachment which views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other”. For him marriage is a gamble. He tells Devi, “You measure the odds as best you can, and adapt yourself to the consequences”. He does not believe in “talking about
ifs and buts, at least not with his wife and considers all that spewing out of feelings is self-indulgent.”

In her new house, she finds two new storytellers – her caretaker Mayamma and her father-in-law, a retired professor of Sanskrit. While the former tells her experiences, the latter offers myths. Mayamma is, as both Yellaiah and Pratima say, a typical Indian female who accepts her fate, curses it but never questions it and lives her life exactly as is expected of her. She bears the brunt of cruelty that society ordains for a woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and a mother (192). Her life has many shades that a woman can ever imagine to experience in her life. She tells that she got married when she was still a child. Her husband was a man of bestial instincts, and her mother-in-law was a peevish woman who kept on shouting on her. The novel describes:

Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, firsthand. She had no choices really. She had coveted birth, endured life, and nursed death. And she had won some victory – if you could call it by such a grand name – through that ragged belief she carried within her. (Hariharan 135-36)
Mayamma recalls that before the marriage, her mother-in-law took her aside and interrogated her in detail. After being fully satisfied she gave her consent for marriage. But later it was she who made a lot of fuss. Mayamma presents miserable life of a woman who was married early. While in the early years of her marriage the reason of her suffering was her inexperience, in the later years her sterility became the cause of her plight. In order to mend her fate she was asked to do penance. For ten years, she did a long and tedious atonement to get a child:

She woke up at four in the morning and walked among the blue-tipped shadows to the pond. She prayed, made vows, and dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness. She starved every other day, she gave up salt and tamarind. She tied little wicker baskets with crimson strips of cloth on the tree dedicated to Jaganmata. She meditated for hours before a pan of clear water, representative of the golden-complexioned Shashti, giver of children. She fed the snakes her rice and curd, she bathed the all conquering lingam with sandalwood, milk, and her tears of ardour. To appease the evil conjunction of the planets, she offered tulsi leaves at the family shrine, chanting mantras without stopping for a breath. She invoked every day the goddess’ thousand names; five hundred times she prostrated herself at the feet of the ever-fertile mother. Every six months she renewed her vows; every six months she invited six Brahmans to a feast, and sent them away with the richest gifts she could lay her hands on.

(Hariharan 81)
All this resulted in a debauch child who too tormented her. Her husband ran away and took away with him all the money in the house. Moreover, her mother-in-law died “whimpering about the curse Mayamma had brought upon her household” (Hariharan 81). While, commenting on her Bindu Jacob states that Mayamma belongs to the generation of women who quietly bore to death their liabilities and never rebelled even if they wanted to, because it was considered outrageous for a woman to shirk away her familial bindings even if she was crushed underneath it (81); S Indira opines that women like Mayamma continue to sacrifice and live a tortured, humiliating life because they have no option, no way out (68). But, anyhow, her plight reflects one more facet of brutal social reality of India; i.e. child marries and the tortures that women bear if they fail to produce a male issue for the family.

The second story-teller, Devi’s father-in-law’s stories remind her childhood with her grandmother. But she observes a variation. While grandmother’s stories seem a prelude to Devi’s womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities; Baba’s stories seem to define the limits of a wife. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. His stories have an undercurrent
demand that in order to gain saint like respected position, a woman must live life according to the terms and conditions dictated from time to time by the society. According to Baba’s opinion a housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic wares, restrained in expenses, as well as controlled in mind, word, and body (Hariharan 70). Among all these obligations Devi leads a tedious life at home while her husband works outside. Getting bored of her loneliness she becomes introvert and re-thinks over her situation:

So this is all there is to be it. 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.

Instead the knife draws a drop at a time. The games it plays with me are ignominious. It pricks my chin; and when my hand flies up to soothe the sore spot, it stings my elbow. The heart I prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (Hariharan 54)

She admits: “my education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood” (Hariharan 54). She describes her state as:

The long afternoon stretches before me like an endless, pointless road. My ache with restlessness, my tongue is parched with lack
of use. The old man is garrulous enough if I seek him out, droning half-stories about a part that oppresses me like a life I want to forget. (Hariharan 79)

After a long debate with herself she decides, in order to get rid of her loneliness, to join a job. But her plan is discarded by her husband, who does not want to let her go to work outside. Instead, he suggests Devi to stay at home to help old Mayamma in daily household works. Devi tells:

He snarls instead about women’s neuroses and my faulty upbringing. Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An animal fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the *thali* around my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing among their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight?

(Hariharan 74)

He further advises her that if she wants to do something outside then she must join painting classes run by wife of one of his subordinates. He seems to be very much impressed by Tara, the painting teacher, because, while keeping herself busy, she has enough time for her children and family also. He considers her well behaved children as the token that she has given them proper attention. It seems that his opinion is the modern version of what Baba has
taught Devi. Like Baba Mahesh too believes that a women gets respect only if she is devoted to her husband and family. Regarding his behaviour Monika Gupta considers that he is chauvinist and hardly bothers about his wife’s emotional needs (93). He is totally inadequate as a husband. He simply cannot and does not wish to understand Devi’s deepest longings, fears, and needs.

But his typical chauvinist nature becomes more apparent when he proposes her to have a baby. He makes this proposal in order to pacify and make her busy. Moreover, while she suggests to adopt a child, Mahesh insists to have their own child. For the purpose, he fixes her meeting with a gynaecologist so that he can be sure about her condition. Devi gets ready to meet the doctor, to officially discuss her personal life. She realizes that only a few years ago, she would have burst into laughter, “but [she] seems to have lost, along with many other things, [her] sense of humour, even [her] girlish ability to giggle. [She is] someone else now” (Hariharan 91). Regarding this change in her behaviour Jasbir Jain observes that marries is at the centre of women suffering because it contains within it the power to destroy and in the novel the confining limits of the relationship stifles the protagonist (125). On her situation A G Khan also holds that the marriage brings an unfortunate
predicament which all women must suffer. An America returned Devi suffers
the same humiliation that Mayamma an illiterate, ignorant village woman did a
few decades ago. The only change is that modern women are humiliated
through modern technology – “smear”, “injection” and “fertility centre” (138).

By tradition, motherhood is considered essential for an Indian woman.

Otherwise, she loses her right to rule the home. Stating the significance of
being a mother in Indian society Sudhir Kakar, with his tongue-in-cheek, says,

“an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and
identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by
her safely into childhood, especially if the child is son, is both a certification
and a redemption” (qtd. in Rao 167). Since the protagonist is unable to
conceive a baby, she loses her hold on the family too.

However, with this predicament Devi keeps on leading a lonely life.

Since her husband’s official tours gradually goes longer, she has no companion
other than Mayamma and deserted books of Baba, who now lives abroad with
her daughter. In her spare time, she calculates how her life has been until now.
She remembers that it was almost without friends. She recalls her unusual
childhood: “I never really had any friends, at least not till I went to college. If I
brought anyone home, Amma was always there, a figure in the background, her back straight with disapproval.” She further describes:

Later the inquisition would begin. Is she a good student? Does she get a good rank in class? She wanted the best for me. She always said. What she really wanted to ask, was Are they Brahmins? Are their kitchens spotless? And do they belong to our heirloom-filled, pure-casted aristocracy? Her love was too snobbish to caress freely. (Hariharan 85)

After making a comparison between her past and present, it becomes difficult for her to stay at easy with unfulfilled past and unsatisfying present. She becomes restless to embrace some change in her life. Nothing around her seems her capable to soothe her. Sympathizing with her condition Bindu Jacob writes: “Mahesh [has] everything a lady could hope for, but his cold and indifferent attitude [is] more than she could suffer. She feels cheated like Gandhari and slighted like Amba. Her penance takes multiple forms of response from self pity to revenge and from self-inflection to a strong sense of injustice” (83).

At this juncture she meets her neighbour Gopal, a singer – “[a] flashy man in his forties who [drinks] rum and [chews] paan between sublime ragas.” She falls in love with him. Unlike Mahesh, this man is very caring for her and
by his acts makes her feel that she is very special for him. He senses things related to her before it takes place and misses nothing. He seems to know every muscle on her face. She feels overwhelmed by her new experience of life. She goes in live-in relation with Gopal, becomes part of his staff, and accompanies him in his musical tours. For some days, her new experience gives her pleasure. Gopal’s raga soothes her feelings. But after sometime she realizes that both belong to two different worlds: he from the light and she from the darkness; he from popular world, she from unpopular world. She feels uneasy about her relationship with him. Because her own experience is splintered and light weight, she realizes that Gopal’s music is no longer romantic and magnetic distant call to her.

Devi represents another harsh social reality of contemporary society – a married woman’s plight who is not happy with her husband and decides to live with her lover. But, since it is unacceptable in a traditional society, she becomes an open subject to everybody’s comment and leering. Everywhere with people, who know Gopal, she experiences an implicit humiliation. Ultimately she decides to change her life and to have her own story – a
different story which has been told till now neither by grandmother nor by Baba. She gets fascinated by her mother-in-law Parvatiamma’s story:

Parvatiamma 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. Had she misread Baba’s stories? Or had she turned them upside down and takes the contradictions, the philosophical paradoxes, to their logical conclusions? (Hariharan 64)

Like Parvatiamma, she decides to turn things upside down by doing what she has not been told and planned by others to do. Instead, she takes up to write a new story. She realises that she hardly has made any choice in life and has done only what has been asked for:

My grandmother fed me fantasies, my father a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope, and when disappointed, pushed me forward in the direction she chose. You could say I have been lucky, I have been well looked after. I have mimed the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose strings they pulled and jerked with their love. (Hariharan 135-37)

Being fed up of others expectations and all pervasive male hypocrisy, she decides to leave Gopal’s house in search of her identity. She returns to her mother “to stay and fight, to make sense of it all” (Hariharan 139). She gets surprised at wild and over-grown garden and more by faint sounds of veena.
Thus, it is apparent that the novel deals with almost every aspect of women’s life and their plight, a sordid social reality of contemporary Indian society. It shows that an all pervasive chauvinism has been controlling Indian social life from time immemorial. A G Khan rightly considers the novel as a Mahabharata of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humility, arrogance and submission. The novelist exploits the rich reservoir of Indian collective consciousness by peeping into the psyche of mythical characters – specially the women victims. She tries to draw an analogy between contemporary and mythical figures. She further states that this Mahabharata is narrated from the feminine perspective telling not of Karna, Arjun or Bhima but of Gandhari and Amba. In the contemporary world there are only two clear cut slots women can fit in – one leads to sanyas in a spirit of resignation and fatalism; the other a full-time housewife. Mayamma and Parvatiamma chose the first: Sita opted for the second – “blameless wife”. But Devi finds herself “in between, around, on the edges of all circles” (135-45). While Khan clusters them in three groups, Makarand Paranjape does not find any difference in their conditions:

All these women have trouble adjusting to a constricting and dehumanizing environment into which they find themselves
trapped. They are unstable people, unable to cope and survive in world which seems to deface their identities. They are slowly, but inexorable driven to the brink of extreme mental distress or suicide. (19)

Along with them, there are other real as well as mythical women characters who with their unique life story supplement the familiarity regarding pathetic women condition. These characters have played a great role in shaping Devi’s, the protagonist, life. With the help of their lives Devi come to know that all of them have a similar fate. It does not matter whether they are queens, princesses, a middle class woman, or a home caretaker. From her childhood, Devi herself is trained to be fit in social life. But she finds a fissure in it. She takes the responsibility to fill this crack with a new story of “a goddess who is not yet made” (Hariharan 95).
Works Cited


Yellaiah, J, and G Pratima. “‘Inside and Out There’: Male Constructs and Female Choices in Gita Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night.*”