



THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT: A READING OF ZERO WOMAN AND HUNDRED PERCENT WOMAN

Auro Prasad Parida

Lecturer, Department of English, U.N. College, Nalagaja, Mayurbhanj, Odisha

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the representation, comparison of growth and development pattern, the desires, will power, priorities of zero woman and hundred percent woman. A hundred percent woman is she who lives her life according to her husband, father, father-in-law, and those women who have a male outlook towards the society. They are fully woman, one hundred percent woman because they have considered the males as their lords, leaders in their life and they possess all the qualities that make a person a woman as per the patriarchal society. On the other hand, the zero woman is she who has her own life, who follows what she wants in her life, who considers herself as the sailor of her own ship, who searches for her own identity, her own capabilities and she becomes zero woman because she does not possess those qualities that are labelled as womanish by the male dominated society.

Key words- *Zero-woman, Hundred percent woman, patriarchy, gender, female narrative*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the post independent India hundreds of woman writers have emerged with different stories and stories from different perspectives. Githa Hariharan is one of the top woman writers of India best known for her sympathetic portrayal of female characters. She has been instrumental in bringing several talented women into the horizon of Indian English Literature. Her novels are life like and a complex crisscross of various types of man and woman characters and their point of views. Most specifically her novels explore the relationship between woman, and magnify the contrast of thoughts and outlooks and ways of life. Sex is biological whereas gender is a social and cultural construct. Men and woman, their roles, responsibilities all are determined by the society. It is the culture and the society that shapes the behavior of the person as a man or woman. The society is not a balanced thing and it tends to tilt towards the powerful and in the course of time males have got the power to run the society, to establish codes and standards for men and woman, which is obviously in a biased manner. Although both men and woman live in the society the power lies in one's hand and it is predominantly male. Those who follow the rules, regulations, those who have the respect for the conventions are called the honorable members of the society and they shall be awarded. The males are the legislator, the supreme law makers and woman are subordinate and mere followers. Those women who follow the rules blindly are rewarded with a medal inscribed with Hundred Percent woman. They are the women who never try to change the ways of the society, no matter how unbearable the pain in following those. They are strict in the observance of the rules pre fixed. They have a habit of sacrificing their life for others. They do not make any efforts to shed the skin even if it is burning. They are dependent, obedient, blind, persuasive, fearful, and god-fearing. The patriarchal society calls them one hundred percent woman as they tolerate everything and do not speak up against injustice, humiliation and infliction upon them and act as per the expectations and demands of the men.

On the other hand, the zero woman are the women who says goodbye to the patriarchal society, its codes, conventions and does not act as per the standard set by the patriarchal society. They dare to purify all the traces of the male dominated society, male thought patterns, ideas, and ideals. Rather they are to identify themselves

with their talents and extraordinariness, they must search for their capabilities and they must build themselves anew and overall, they must cross the knowledge threshold of man. Zero is not a senseless number at all, nor it is valueless. It is the beginning, a new beginning, that is the point where one can start afresh. Zero woman is she who begins her life anew, fresh and tries to make herself sovereign. They have no male companion; no single thought of man and they have done something different and something labelled as unwomanly by the patriarchy.

Through her woman protagonists Hariharan bravely presents the unnoticed aspects of women and their thoughts which had been invisible to the world. In this matter Dr. S. Prasanna Sree writes:

“Through this medium of expressing themselves in writing, women have investigated and published those aspects of their lives as sexual beings that have not previously been acknowledged by society. Despite late 21st century, women are still very far from attaining the required level of socio-cultural, educational, and economic advantages usually enjoyed by men.” (39)

In the novel ‘Thousand Faces of Night’ she brings two types of women onto the stage for sharing ideas, arguments. This novel focuses upon the female characters Sita, her daughter Devi, Parvati Amma, Devi’s mother-in-law, and the maid Mayamma.

Sita, Devi’s mother is a typical brahmin lady who got married at an early age, done excellently in her housewife job, an employee in her small office called kitchen. She has sacrificed everything, her desire, ambition, passion for music only to please her husband and her family. She thinks she is doing the best a mother can do for her daughter, selecting the best. This is the very way a mother can love her daughter. But she is not aware of the growing revolution of Devi against her, not although directly but as a symbol of patriarchal ghost who is completely possessed by patriarchy. Nilufer E. Bharucha judiciously comments on this relationship:

“Devi’s rebellious spirit, however, is not so easily tamed. In a clever move, Sita gives her along rope and lets her go to University in the US, but when the time is ripe Devi is drawn back to India and married off to Mahesh. Marriage once more traps Devi in man-made enclosures.” (102)

Even in the long absence of Devi’s father she is still carrying out his orders and her mother-in-law’s orders. She is thinking that it is victorious to stick to the old order of things and it is the only way to bring into life the most pious thing called happiness. Devi always dreams of a friendly mom who can listen to her, with whom she could share her feelings. When she starts talking about her American days to her mom, she reacts in a very unusual way.

“She smiled gently and said, all that is over now. The important thing is that you are back, you are in Madras. Why go over an old story again.” (Hariharan 13)

Devi always wants to express herself to her mother as a friend but a death like silence prevails in between them. Sita is a stern; a decisive woman who selects everything for her daughter and her decision is full and final.

Like a veteran chess player, she made her moves. When she kneaded a marriage for me, a swyamvara. (Hariharan 14)

Sita never thinks about the goals, desires of Devi but does that what she considers best for Devi. She has sent her to America and now she is also bestowed with all Indian values. When Devi said she is not interested in marriage with Srinivasan, a potential groom her mother says-

“We cannot be too cautious when choosing a husband.” (Hariharan 17)

She has followed all the instructions of her husband, her father-in-law and mother-in-law that she never cares for her own happiness. She has given her best to prove herself as a hundred percent woman and worthy to be rewarded with a medal inscribed with hundred percent woman. She neither questions the pre-fixed order nor tries to change it. Rather by carrying out all the instructions, conventions of the male dominated society she has become an inseparable part of that society as a result her thinking, her ideology have been automated in that way. Devi’s mother Sita is not a born cook. For the happiness of her husband’s family, she has sacrificed her passion for music. She is trained in music and plays veena beautifully. She has a few old photographs lying in the old cupboard of an abandoned room in which she held the veena so close as if it is her lover. But she was debarred from playing the veena and out of her pain and frustration she has destroyed most of her photographs. Everyone in her in-laws’ house said to do the house chore and leave the music.

“.... put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter in law...? We never saw her touch the Veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbors praised.” (Hariharan 30)

She forgot her life with the veena. She lived as per the standards of patriarchal society only to please others and not becoming herself. Devi’s mother who after living in the patriarchal society has not only become a product of patriarchy but also a leader in carrying out to patriarchy to the next level as well as to the next generation. She sees the society in a man’s eyes. After the death of her husband, she wanted her daughter to grow like a woman with all womanly qualities, because that will be important for marriage. She warns her

husband about the girl and says that as the girl grows, she must stay away from fairy tales of gods and goddesses and fantasies because they can harm her in future. She also instructs her daughter to stop dreaming.

She has turned stone for her daughter because she knows how difficult it is for a girl to live with a dream and for her own happiness. Devi is always taught to follow her husband and obey his orders. Because this is the ultimate way to heaven. Sita throughout her life gives her best to be a hundred percent woman. She has not been helpless after the death of her husband rather makes herself a stone in living her life and upbringing her daughter as per her capability. She has sent her America for good education, and gets her married off to a man with handsome salary. What more can a mother do for her daughter; this thought has satisfied her. But she never knows what her daughter thinks. All her illusion and complacency has been broken into pieces when she comes to know her daughter's defiance of her orders. She never thinks her daughter will do this to her even after sacrifices she has made for her. There she thinks about herself, her life, her happiness, and her targets. She has put her best efforts to rear her child. All her hopes on her daughter are broken when she leaves her husband. She is disillusioned-

“By the time she received the letter, with lurid details of the betrayal, Sita was in a fury. So, this was what she reaped after years of sacrifice, years of iron-like-self-control. After all those quarrels with her husband about discipline for growing child, won through silent, ferocious struggles and sleepless nights of through, between-the-lines planning, the 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.” (Hariharan 108)

Sita feels very helpless for the actions committed by her daughter. She spends all her frustration in cleaning the house, the garden and kitchen. She also dismisses the cook and the driver from their job. Being very tired she sits for self-examination to find out where the mistake lies for which her daughter openly defies her. She revisits her past. Now she goes closer and closer to the veena, touches it, dusts it, and holds it close to her bosom. This clearly shows her reverse journey and starting a new life for herself. She has lived for everyone around her but today after years she is starting it fresh with herself. After her husband's death, after her daughter's defiance she might have lost her life or the very essence of her life. But she gradually understands her essence and starts her life with the veena, the music, the revival of the interest and enthusiasm again. The woman makes reverse journey to reach at zero and begins her life. Becoming zero is victorious here, where there is no need of any male to fulfill a woman. Finally, she has reached the point zero to start afresh. Here the life does not end but begins anew.

“... Devi opened the gate and looked wonderingly at the garden, wild and over-grown, but lush despite its sand-choked roots. Then she quickened her footsteps as she heard the faint sound of a veena, hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house.” (Hariharan 139)

Next comes the character Mayamma who is a maid servant in Devi's in-law's house. She has been working there for a long time. She is neither educated in America like Devi nor a woman from a rich family like Sita. She is just a common woman. Throughout her life she has done everything to make her husband or her son happy. She has not done anything for her happiness. She has been modelled in such a society where it is sinful to think about oneself. She had always tried her best to be the cent percent woman in her life. A woman can only be great by tolerating her bestial husband or by suffering and penance and by sacrificing everything for others. She was married earlier at the age of twelve. Her husband was very rude and turned out to be a gambler. Mayamma could not conceive a baby even after two years of marriage. Her mother-in-law examined her hair, her jewelry and agreed to make Mayamma her daughter-in-law as she believed the words of the astrologer who promised that she would give her many strong and powerful grandsons.

“Mayamma's mother-in-law watched her slim waist intently for the first year. The second year she broke into complaint. What kind of a girl is this, she said. She eats as much as anybody else but is barren. Her horoscope is a lie, she will have to do penance to change its course. Mayamma welcomed her penance like an old friend.” (Hariharan 80)

Mayamma never thinks about herself. Even if she is not interested in daily sex but her husband is an animal and he will not let her sleep throughout the night. In order to get a child, especially a son, she has started doing penance only meant for a barren woman. She wakes up every morning, takes bath in the dawn in the village pond, she prays, she makes vows, dips herself again and again in the cold water. She keeps fast, she sacrifices her favorite food, she binds the crimson strips on the sacred tree dedicated to Jaganmata. She meditates hours and hours before the pan of clear water, representative of the golden-complexioned Shasthi, giver of children. The author writes-

“Even she feeds the snakes her rice and curds, ball-conquering lingam with sandalwood, milk, and her tears of ardor. To appease the evil conjunction of the planets, she offered tulasi leaves at the family shrine, chanting mantras without stopping for a breath.” (Hariharan 81)

She has never stepped back to make herself a hundred percent woman. She needs a child only to satisfy her husband and her mother-in-law and to be free from a sin. She has been brainwashed with a saying that a woman without a child goes to hell. "A woman without a child, say the sages, goes to hell." (Hariharan 81) She does her penance for ten years very sincerely. At last, she bears a son who she thinks will be the harbinger of happiness in her family. But her husband leaves the house after taking all the money. Her mother-in-law blames her and scolds and curses her. She thinks even if his drunkard, gambler husband abandons her and her child, she will live for her son and not for herself. But as the child grows, he starts threatening her mother and takes all the jewelry. He hits his mother with iron rod. Even after that when her son falls ill, she sits near him for two months taking care of him. But he dies at last and Mayamma weeps. Everywhere she tries to make herself suitable to the demands of the patriarchal society. As a wife she must tolerate her husband, love him even if he is rude, care for him even if he is careless and as a mother, she must bear all the pain her son will inflict upon her. Throughout her life she acts as per the old ways of life, bears all the pain but can never think of herself and her happiness. What she gains is a matter of question.

Devi and her mother-in-law Parvati Amma both begin their life with a goal to make themselves hundred percent woman that is hundred percent wife, hundred percent daughter-in-law. But they ultimately make a reverse journey to make themselves unique and not bounded to the typical woman's life. They are zero woman who ultimately live their own life, for the sake of themselves, they have shed their old skins to make themselves new, another individual.

Devi who studies in America and returns after her studies, finds the ways of life in Madras are far different from America. She is puzzled by the behavior of her mother. She says she must live the life usually lived in Madras. Devi expects her mother to be friendly with her like the mothers of her American friends. But nothing such happens. Now her mother wants her to get married and live her life. Her mother will select the best for her, and she has no right to talk about herself, her desires, goals of life. At first Devi was not interested in marriage but her mother pressurizes her to get married because she looks at the world in a man's eyes. Marriage is the ultimate fulfillment for a woman. Finally, she gets married to Mahesh who is a regional manager in a multinational company. When the family members and relatives prepare the wedding function, they are so happy because a girl is getting married. What can be better than a girl is settling down. Nothing is more important than this in a girl's life.

"Every time I ventured out of my room, someone would pat me and say, do not worry, do not worry. It will be all over soon and you will be settled. What a lucky girl you are!" (Hariharan 23)

A girl's life is measured with how early she gets married and to whom she marries and this settles everything in a girl's life. Devi is surprised to see this kind of life is lived by all here without regret and complaint. She is forced to think about the meaning of her existence while living all alone and while her husband is away. She also thinks about Mahesh's bestial lust on the bed. Her father-in-law talks about the role of a woman and their sacrifice by fetching stories from ancient myths and legends. Mahesh remains busy in his tours where Devi stays alone in the house and of course with the shadowy presence of her father-in-law and Mayamma. Devi feels alienated. When Devi wants to search for a job, Mahesh questions her, when she tries to learn Sanskrit, she is discouraged. She follows the path as per her mother's words and gives everything that Mahesh, her husband demands and never disobeys him and his authority. Devi hears the stories from her grandmother and her father-in-law where she finds the limitations of the woman everywhere. A woman is completely dependent on her husband for everything. It has been believed that a woman always needs a man to fulfill every aspect of her life.

"The path a woman must walk to reach heaven' says Baba, is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting: by serving her husband, she is honored in the heavens." (Hariharan 55)

Her loneliness has been intensified after the departure of her father-in-law to her daughter who stays in New York. She has been taught that to be a good house wife and a good daughter-in-law and a good a wife is the essence of woman's life. Devi becomes introspective about her life and what kind of woman she has become. In her long stay in loneliness, she feels she is growing mad without sharing her feelings with someone intimate.

"Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hand reaches out: and dream instead, in spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight?" (Hariharan 74)

Everyone says motherhood is very important for a woman. If she does not attain motherhood, she is not worth of a woman. Mahesh wants a baby but Devi questions him why does he need a baby. Mahesh is shocked when a woman asks the need of a baby. Devi cannot conceive the baby so Mahesh booked an appointment with a gynecologist. She comes to know that cannot be a mother and gets frustrated. After that she leaves Mahesh. Eventually, she seeks comfort in Gopal a local but globally popular musician. Rama Kundu remarks:

“It is less for love than to show her rage of rejection of a demeaning marriage that had crushed dignity, individual aspiration and mocked her emotional imaginative refinement.” (Kundu,120)

There also she is not getting the comfort and feels dominated. Devi resists against the male dominated society and its pressure upon her life. She wants to be something in her life. Here her life does not end at all like Mayamma. The feelings of Devi when she leaves Gopal in the midnight without the awareness of Gopal has been well portrayed by the author.

“She had felt bold and carefree when she left Mahesh’s house, a little like heroine. But she felt like a fugitive now, though she was for the first time, no longer on run.” (Hariharan 138)

She thinks about her journey, to discover something very significant out of the insignificant things. When she cannot conceive a baby Mayamma encourages her to go through penance and pray to have a child and she further makes her aware that if she is not a mother of a child then she is going to hell.

“There may be child. Tell your beads till your fingers are calloused and numb with exhaustion. Sit between five fires in a grove of penance for the sake of your unborn son. Find Shashti’s head, a smooth stone the size of a man’s head that rests under a sanctified banyan tree. Offer the freshest, most luscious of fruits, flowers, and rice to the rocky goddess. Drink the potion blessed by Jaganmata, slit a goat’s throat at Kali’s shrine.” (Hariharan 93-94)

But Devi has decided to make her own journey, to write her own story. Of course, it is difficult to leave the ways of life someone has been learning and following since her childhood. She has the fears of crossing her limits.

“In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears and the accursed desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood blur the bold strokes, black and white, of revenge. I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act-humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, a final mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with.” (Hariharan 95)

CONCLUSION:

The novel captures two types of women and the conflict in them brilliantly. The hundred percent women in this novel never ever try to change their ways of life and continue to live despite of several assaults upon them. They cannot ever dare to change their life. On the other hand, the zero woman who breaks the shackle of age-old traditions and starts her life anew. They have been ridiculed for their audacity but ultimately, they become the master of their destiny. Githa Hariharan is a clever novelist who brings two types of woman characters into play and thus succeeds in bringing her philosophy of a woman’s life.

REFERENCES

- Bharucha, Nilufer E. “Inhabiting Enclosures and Creating Spaces: The Worlds of Women in Indian Literature in English.” In Ariel, Vol. 29, No.1, January 1998.Print.
- Hariharan, Githa. The Thousand Faces of Night. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Kundu, Rama. “For a story of my own-the female quest for self-identity: A Global Perspective.
- Sree, S. Prasanna. “Women as a Writer: Remapping Identities.” New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English. Part III. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.2005