

Agency Or The Age Of Marriage: A Study Of Female Characters In Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces Of Night.

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Abstract

The present paper is written in the backdrop of the new legislation that specified women's legal age of marriage in India as 21 and the debates it raised. The paper basically takes the view that women's liberation is not tied with her legal age of consent or educational qualifications alone. By analyzing three female characters of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan, it argues that women's liberation is a question of women gaining agency. The first part of the paper gives a brief description of the ongoing debate about the legal age of marriage for women. The second part of the paper is an analysis of the three major female characters of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. These three characters are the female protagonist Devi, her mother Sita, and the female servant Mayamma. All of them have made sacrifices for their families and lost their own selves. Based on the analysis of these characters, the paper argues that education or the legal age of marriage alone cannot provide the circumstances for women's liberation. The real issue is women gaining agency. The paper makes the conclusion that unless and until women gain agency, their struggle against patriarchy and the patriarchal family will be incomplete.

Keywords: marriageable age debate, women's education, women's liberation, tradition, female agency, patriarchy.

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The Government of India's decision to raise women's legal age of marriage to 21 in December 2021 triggered a lot of discussions. Those in support of the bill argued that this would lead to women's empowerment as women would get more time to get educated and stand on their own legs before marriage. Marriage at an earlier age would reduce a girl's chances of getting a job. The less educated has fewer chances of getting employed. Also, they would be in a better position to handle the complications of marriage and marital life at the age of 21 as they would be more matured than at an earlier age. At the age of 18- which was the age of marriage before the new legislation was proposed- girls are more vulnerable and they will have to concede to their parents' choice. However, at the age of 21, they will be more empowered and need not necessarily yield to the parental pressure. This was the line of argument of those who supported the bill.

These arguments were not received without objections. Those who opposed the bill had points which were equally valid. Women have the right to vote at the age of 18. They also have the right to be in a relationship at the same age. The new act was seen as the violation of many such rights including the rights of women belonging to some of the minority religions. Without entering this debate or trying to find an ultimate answer, a few observations can be made here. Women's liberation in India is mostly tied with the question of marriage and education; or that is how the issue has been perceived. Tradition, as observed by many critics, acts as a barrier against women's liberation. Education on the other hand is viewed as a liberating force. The popular perception is that the more educated will be the more liberated. For all these arguments that are for and against the legislation, related statistical data can be found! This paper is based on the assumption that concrete life situations from the lives of women can speak volumes of truth that statistical data cannot represent. Here, the problem of women getting education and liberation are discussed in the context of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan as the novel portrays many such life situations. Ultimately, like the novel, this paper also takes up the perspective that women's liberation is a question of women gaining agency. The paper also enquires about what prevents women from gaining that agency.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a few remarks can be made regarding the way the Indian English Literature represents the issues of women. The opinions of a few critics will be cited here. Most of these opinions

are about the female protagonists or female authors in Indian English fiction. First of all, the question of what differentiates a female author from a male author should be addressed. There can be different answers based on different viewpoints like biological, gender or deconstructionist stand points. After analyzing the different definitions of different scholars, Chandra P. Agarwal comes up with an interesting definition of a female author. She is of the opinion that what differentiates a female author from a male author is their perception of the woman with regard to “the self” and “the other.” Most of the female writers will have the sensibility and talent to represent the woman as “the self” with all its nuances. On the other hand, the male writers and numerous female writers portray the woman in terms of “the other (132).”

R. K. Gupta views that,

Broadly speaking, a feminist approach may simply mean a woman-centred approach, an approach which assumes the centrality of woman and seeks to project and interpret experience from the viewpoint of a feminine consciousness and a feminine sensibility (179).

Another critic, Ashish Sengupta, makes the observation that “sexuality” is an important aspect of defining the “gendered subject position;” in fact, it is equally important as “textuality (182).” All these observations can be summarized in the following way. In essence, a female writer who wants to take up the cause of women is one who has a woman-centered approach; and is able to portray the woman as “the self” without “othering” her; and has the understanding that a woman’s sexuality is important in portraying the identity of her. Now, let us come to the analysis of the novel by the end of which, we will be able to get back to the discussion at the beginning of the paper.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* was published in 1992 and it became an instant success. One may easily observe that the novel has some autobiographical elements in it as the portrayal of the female protagonist closely resembles with the autobiographical details of the author. The novel portrays the life of the character called Devi, her family and the people close to her. When the novel begins, Devi is in America. She returns to India after completing her education there. It is interesting here to note what helps Devi to assert her agency and what helps her family subjugate her. As said in the beginning of the paper, tradition is easily recognized as an obstacle for a woman to achieve liberation where as education is viewed as having a liberative potential. Correspondingly, family is viewed as an institution that limits the women into the domestic sphere while in contrast, education is looked at as having the liberative potential for female emancipation. The analysis of the concrete situations of the novel will help throw some light on these assumptions.

The three major female characters that dictate the plot of the novel deserve to be given special focus. These characters are Devi, who is the personification of the author herself; Sita, the mother of Devi; and Mayamma, the female servant in the household of Mahesh, Devi’s husband. Devi is the female protagonist of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, she is located in America completing her Masters’ degree. Devi is one of those students who had the privilege to study abroad, that too in the US! She has a lover named Dan there. “Dan was Devi’s answer to the white claustrophobia of an all-clean, all-American campus (3).” Later on, the reader finds that back home, her own family members and her husband’s family members are also claustrophobic; a kind of claustrophobia induced by caste, the age old customs, and the traditional notions about life. Devi’s years in America might have delivered her from the clutches of the age-old traditions and customs temporarily. But after returning home, she finds herself in the same trap again. Her mother carefully operates her plan to get Devi married off to someone. She wants Devi to forget her American life and be a traditional girl. She talks about Devi’s American life in a rather discouraging tone: “All that is over now. The important thing is that you are back, you are now in Madras. Why go over an old story again (13)?” In a nut shell, Devi’s mother and her relatives lock her in marital trap (14-15). Her husband Mahesh, contrary to the initial impression he gives to Devi, shows his chauvinistic character soon after the marriage (65, 79). Devi breaks the marital tie later and becomes a disciple of a well-known singer called Gopal and involves in an affair with him. She breaks that affair too and comes back to her home at Chennai at the end of the novel.

Devi’s mother Sita’s life follows a similar trajectory. She also loses her “self” after marriage but she tackles the situation more “pragmatically.” Sita used to play *veena* very well. When she comes to the house of Mahadevan after her marriage with him, she brings the *veena* along with her. In her husband’s house, she continues practicing *veena*. She would finish all the household chores and start playing the *veena*. One day, Mahadevan goes to the *pooja* room and he sees the room’s floor not wiped and flowers for the *pooja* not picked. He gets angry and calls Sita, his wife, in a loud trembling voice. Sita has been absorbed in playing *veena*. She doesn’t hear Mahadevan’s call and she continues playing the *veena*. Mahadevan becomes furious and he shouts at her. “Put that *veena* away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law? (30)” asks Mahadevan. Sita sits silently for a minute and grasps the situation. She pulls the strings of the *veena* out of the wooden base and says that she is a wife and a daughter-in-law (30).

She becomes a perfect “house keeper” and a “blameless wife” (101). Her motto, as a house keeper, was “good housekeeping, good taste, hardwork (101).” But Sita was not weak, both as a wife, mother and a

housekeeper. Later, she started ruling the household “with an iron hand (105).” She gained this strength not without any cost. In fact “marriage had meant that Sita would have to learn to eat dry chapattis, which refused to go down the throat like sticky wet balls of mashed rice.” She was modest in her attitude and behavior. She was “a woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifices without fanfare (103).” Sita helped Mahadevan greatly. She was the motivation behind all of his professional achievements. The success in his professional life makes Mahadevan a “Brahmin among Brahmins” which meant “pure blood and a healthy bank balance (104).”

On the surface level, it may seem that Sita has fought against all odds and emerged victorious in her life. But at a deeper level, it can be seen that Sita lost her “self” countering her own family. At the end of the novel, we witness Sita playing the *veena* again. This means that she has been missing this ever since she became a wife. That explains her personal tragedy.

Another major female character in the novel that catches the attention of the readers is Mayamma. She is also one of the very few characters in the novel from a lower caste background. She gets married at the age of twelve. Her husband’s family chooses her believing what the astrologer told them. According to the astrologer, her horoscope was unblemished. Her horoscope indicates that she will give birth to many healthy children. This motivates her future mother-in-law to choose her as her son’s bride (79). Her husband was also not more than a child considering his age. He goes astray and creates troubles in the family. Even her relationship with her husband was not an enjoyable one. As time passes, her mother-in-law starts cursing her on account of not having a child (80).

Mayamma too gets upset. The tradition does not give any respect to a wife who fails to conceive. “A woman without a child, say the sages, goes to hell.” This explains the perception of the society about wives! The wives are meant to give birth to children and toil in the kitchen! Mayamma doesn’t revolt against the tradition or her mother-in-law; instead, she follows the same tradition that degraded her status more closely than ever. She wakes up at four in the morning and takes bath in the cold water of the pond. She gives up eating salt and tamarind (80). She makes offers to the goddess Kali and sacrifices a goat. Finally she gives birth to a son after ten long years. Despite all these, her life becomes more miserable. Her husband runs away with all the money in the house and never comes back. The astrologer is again summoned but he still stands by what he said earlier. He says that her horoscope is without any blemish and her good fortune will lead her husband back. But again the astrologer is mistaken (81).

Mayamma’s son becomes the next major concern for her. At the age of fourteen, he steals the last gold bangles she had. Later he demands her diamond earrings. When she doesn’t give it to him, he hits her (82). For every misfortune she suffered in her life, her mother-in-law cursed her and her horoscope. “Her horoscope is a lie,” states the old woman (80). Her mother-in-law’s mistreatment does not stop with curse. Mayamma undergoes cruel physical abuse in the hands of her mother-in-law.

Her son falls ill with a high fever. For two months, the fever doesn’t cure and he succumbs to death. By then, there was no tenderness left in her for her son. With his dead body, Mayamma buries her horoscope also (82). Mayamma gets a second life with the help of Parvatamma, Mahesh’s mother. She becomes a servant in their house and gets a better status compared to her previous self in her husband’s house.

Thus, all these female characters go through difficult circumstances and come out of them somehow. It is interesting how Devi, acting as the mouthpiece of the author, reflects about these three characters including herself. “She thought of the three of them, Mayamma, Sita and herself. Three of the women who walked a tightrope and struggled for some balance, for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves (135).”

The analysis of the female characters can be concluded here and the questions raised at the beginning of the paper may be addressed. The central question the paper raises is that of agency. It has been evident from the discussion that the central characters of the novel find it difficult to gain agency due to the influence of family and tradition. Education does not seem to be an alternative to the patriarchal tradition as the fate of Devi indicates.

In the context of the novel, this problem can be viewed in a number of ways. On the one hand, Devi’s experience tells that her masters’ degree from America doesn’t do any good to her. She becomes an ordinary home maker in India. One problem here is that education should not be limited to the school or college education alone; it should be related to the cultural capital one has or acquires. Though, it can be gained through education also. In the context of the novel, Devi has cultural capital gained through her education. Sita also has the baggage of cultural capital behind her. It came to her through her privileged position in the society. Her knowledge in *veena* indicates nothing other than this. Both of them have the hope that they can lead a life they want some time in their future. But Mayamma doesn’t have any such hopes, thanks to her poor educational and community background. She doesn’t have anything that can be compared to what is called as ‘cultural capital.’ It is for this reason alone that Mayamma’s case is more miserable. Thus, education and cultural capital can contribute to women’s liberation; but at the same time, patriarchy does invent methods to suppress educated women.

The most powerful institution that tradition has created against women’s liberation is the family. Everything these three female characters have sacrificed is for their families. In the case of Mayamma and Devi,

they got a miserable life in return. In the case of Sita, though she is well-respected in the family, the price she has paid for it is huge. Both Devi and Mayamma leave their family behind and move on. This is how they escape patriarchy. There are other female characters that do the same. Parvatamma, Baba's wife, leaves her family and goes away. She wanted to lead an ascetic life; but that is not the role assigned to her. Gauri, a servant in Devi's grandmother's house also crosses the boundaries of the family to lead a life that she wants. The novel portrays the institution of family with all its brutal and misogynistic traits putting tradition at fault again.

Apart from tradition, caste plays a major role in oppressing women. Both the upper caste and the lower caste women are suppressed by caste hierarchies and the prejudice created by it. The author portrays two upper caste households and the caste notions existing there honestly. Baba, Mahesh's dad expresses it openly. "'Devi,' Baba said, 'wherever you are, remember you are a Brahmin. You may not know it, but underneath that skin flows a fine-veined river of pure blood, the legacy of centuries of learning (52).'" But this "legacy of centuries of learning" does not teach him that women have equal rights as men. This is why his wife Parvatamma had to leave the family to follow the life she wanted. When Baba comes to know that her wife has left the family, he responds very frantically. "She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of a god, only death is home-coming (64)." The same Baba praises wives of saints for being the inspiration of these saints. "'Women,' said Baba, 'have always been the instruments of the saint's initiation into *bhakti*' (65)." The logic of Baba is that women can help and support their husbands in their spiritual journey; but women are not allowed to make that journey. Women are only allowed to remain in the domestic sphere. Their most important task in life is to give birth to children. This is why, despite all her academic credentials, Devi has to undergo painful treatment for getting pregnant (90-92). Devi herself curses her "stubborn, unrelenting womb (93)." Devi, despite her foreign educational experience, has to prove her credentials as a woman who is capable of giving birth to a baby!

The issue discussed in the beginning of the chapter is that of increasing the legal age of marriage of women. Legislation can help women fight their battle. According to Priyanka Tripathi, three laws contributed immensely to the development of Feminist perspective in India. They were the abolition of Sati in 1829; The Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929- both made by the British; and the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 (Tripathi 183). These are facts and there is no denying of them. But the question remains that whether legislation is enough to resolve all the trouble women face. The novel tells us that Mayamma married at the age of 12; Sita at the age of 20; and Devi in her twenties. Despite the disparity in the age of their marriage, they all fall victims to the patriarchal family set up. Thus, without involving in the ongoing debate, one may observe that the real fight of women against the patriarchal family set up will continue irrespective of the legislation as patriarchy invents new strategies to subjugate women who dissent. Women will continue to be in their inferior status as long as they do not gain agency. Githa Hariharan's novel is an eloquent proof of that.

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