

Feministic Approach in The Novel's of Githa Hariharan: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan, a well-known Indian woman author, has tried to focus on the deeply entrenched biases of Indian society against the feminine gender. Githa Hariharan's new-age feminism is not about the eradication of differences between the sexes or the attainment of equal prospects, but rather concerns the individual's rights to identify one and be comfortable in one's own skin. The chief psychological consistencies between the sexes include women's emotive uncertainty, greater acceptance for tiresome details, inability for intellectual thought and proneness to submission. The feminist mindfulness is to identify oneself as the victim to the power of men in society and the system. However, modern day feminists are against masculinist hierarchy but are firm believers of sexual dichotomy. This paper will study the feministic approach of Githa Hariharan in her four novels that is The Thousand Faces of Night, The Ghosts of Vasu Master, In Times of Siege and Fugitive Histories.

Keywords: Feminism, Sexual Dichotomy, Subjugation, Self-Effacement, Gender Biased, intolerance.

Introduction

Githa Hariharan is a modern soul. Born in Coimbatore in 1954, she grew up mainly in Bombay and Manila. She completed her BA in English from Bombay University and MA in Communication from Fairland University, USA. Her first job was with the Public Broadcasting System in New York. Later, she worked as an Editor for a publishing firm in India. Currently, she free-lances as an editor based in New Delhi.

Her first novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (1992) entitled, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, it talks in lyrical prose, walking through the lives of three women who serve as the eyes to the society and its prevailing norms. *The Art of Dying* (1993), a collection of short stories, was described by Coetzee as:

beautifully written stories about death and its place in life.

Her writing trajectory was mainly based on feminism but made an offshoot with *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), which dealt with themes such as learning, educating, healing and reality. In her personal life, she won an historic battle against the societal norms of identifying a child by its father. She, along with her husband, fought to have their children named after her. This famous case was argued by Indira Jaisingh. In the end, the Supreme Court consented to identify the mother as a natural guardian of the child. In total, she has written five novels and a few short stories. Her works are listed as follows:

❖ Novels

- *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1990).
- *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994).
- *When Dreams Travel* (1999).
- *In Times of Siege* (2003).

- Fugitive Histories (2009).

❖ Short Stories

- The Winning Team
- The Art of Dying

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* also portrays women surviving and existing in marriages. She shows how society talks about the duties of women but fails to make any mention of the duty or obligation that a husband might have towards his wife. She compares the ideas and dreams of a modern young woman who has lived abroad to those of an educated or uneducated woman belonging to an earlier generation.

Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* primarily deals with teaching, learning and teacher–pupil relationship. However on dwelling deeper, issues concerning women also surface, especially their desires and how a patriarchal society tends to ignore their very existence. Despite not being a woman-centric novel, themes of feminism are rightly portrayed. Hariharan portrays the marginalization of the girl child, the bias towards women, physical violence on women, mental torture, feminine inferiority, loneliness of widows and friendship among women. Hariharan in an interview sums up her gender perspective in the novel as follows:

The Ghosts of Vasu Master was my most ambitious attempt at looking at gender elliptically. And I think that is actually the most autobiographical of my novels. (www.anothersubcontinent.com, 2005).

She seeks to awaken the minds of both men and women to attain equality and empower themselves.

The feminist theories based on 'gender', structured the shape of the feminist debate in the 1980s. These theories identify and deconstruct stereotypes, create resistance to

the ideologies promoted by them and encourage women to seek alternative ways of life. (Sinha, 2011, p. 109)

Vasu's feminine ghosts are his mother, grandmother and the actress Rita – who was Mona in his childhood fancy. Vasu's mother would have died when he was very young, but she was a woman who was ignored in childhood. In fact, her parents did not even give her a name for about a year as they did not want to spend money on the naming ceremony of a girl child, presuming that society would disapprove of their action. H. B. Patil has identified the feminine side to the story and sums it up as follows:

Many critics attempt to explore the novel with different perspectives including feminism, psychology and self-discovery. The present novel is essentially about stereotypes as found in the literature and culture of India. The focus of the novel is on the exploration of the stereotype of traditional Indian woman in The Ghosts of Vasu Master. In it Vasu Master's mother Lakshmi and his wife Mangala exhibit the stereotype of traditional woman. These characters represent the formula of the psyche of millions of Indian women. (H. B. Patil, 2011, p. 1)

His mother is given the name Laxmi when an old sweeper woman brings solace to Laxmi's family that even a girl child may be a blessing and might be the personification of Goddess Laxmi (the Goddess of Wealth), thus enriching their lives. Nevertheless, nothing as such happens and Laxmi remains as the sixth unsatisfied daughter. In fact, the book reads:

she could never get over her inferiority complex. (The Ghosts of Vasu Master)

Patriarchy is a major concept, with Vasu Master being a product of the same. He considers women to be secondary in stature, as is noted by his attitude towards his wife Mangala. The rural women of India are well-represented through Mangala, Jamilla and Eliamma. In fact, Mangala and Jamilla share not only the same village but also the same suffering.

By this time I must have seen Jameela without her burqua, because when I remembered her deep, throaty laughter, I saw her again. She was full, earthy, with a slight limp that offset her ripe perfection. (The Ghosts of Vasu Master, p. 43)

Eliamma is alienated by her gender, class and community. She is a fisherwoman longing for freedom from all the restrictions in society.

Eliamma walked alone by the sea night after night. She looked out into the watery horizon with longing. She yearned to go for beyond the distance she could swim. She wanted to be in the centre of the expanse she saw, in a womb held in palace by the ocean's ancient secrets. (The Ghosts of Vasu Master, p. 127)

Hariharan has managed to show how women are subjected to humiliation and differential treatment by the age-old traditions that do not provide emancipation.

The novel deals with the identity crisis of a modern Indian woman, who is given wings to fly but which is cut off post marriage. Her work is very much relevant in today's times. Despite globalization, India continues to be steeped in traditions and social structures. However, the current generation seeks self-realization and liberation. Dr Padmini and S. K. Sudha (2011) comment:

In The Thousand Faces of Night Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She 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. (Padmini and Sudha, p. 126)

Githa Hariharan writes to awaken feminine consciousness. Her contemporary characters are compared to age-old mythological characters, iterating the fact the women and their aspirations have significance in any point in history. Sita, the mother of Devi, the protagonist, is compared to Gandhari by her mother-in-law. Similar to how Gandhari sacrificed herself for

her husband and family, Sita too gives up her hobbies and focuses on household work. Domestic life becomes her primary concern, pleasing her mother-in-law and husband. Hariharan describes Sita as:

A house wife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word, and body, she who doesn't transgress her attains heaven even as her lord does. (The Thousand Faces of Night, pp. 70–71)

Devi is an embodiment of all the pains borne by Sita, Mayamma and Parvatamma, as she finally defies society and revolts against the institution of marriage.

Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Siege* is based on the communal events that took place in New Delhi in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The female protagonist is an outspoken young woman with a broken knee, Meena, who comes into the life of Shive Murthy, turning it upside down. Githa Hariharan's feminist philosophies are indirectly mirrored in this novel. Krishnan Das and Deepchand Patra have accurately pointed:

Female voices who have wielded the writer's pen to present forth literature which not only highlight women's plight in society, but have also enriched the field with brilliant narratives, styles, techniques and themes, enchanting generations of readers, and immortalizing their own agenda in penning their works. (Das and Patra, 2012)

Githa Hariharan's novel iterates the aforesaid. The feminism in this novel is unique as the male protagonist, Shiv, seeks inspiration from the female protagonist, Meena. Under her recommendations, Shiv is obligated to challenge the anxieties of his times and select a course for the future. However, at first, he must come to terms with his own imperfect past history, his uncertainties and his preoccupation.

Githa Hariharan has attempted to liberate women from patriarchal tyranny. *In Times of Siege*, the novelist depicts two strong female characters, Meena and Prof. Shiva's wife,

Rekha. Meena displays a confidence rarely seen in girls of her age. Shiv's appreciation for Meena's beauty is almost improper:

Fish-eyed, Fish eyed, dark-browed, Tangle-haired, wide-hipped, generous lipped. Shiv invokes Meena, Meena's attributes, with a thousand names like a devotee who mumbles himself into a stupor. (In Times of Siege, p. 49).

He considers himself to be her:

Devotee whose words keep him upstairs in safety. (In Times of Siege, p. 50)

Shiva admiration is steeped in adulterous notions:

Meena leans back, lets her hair fall into the sink like dark curtain [...] the water is cool and refreshing; she shuts her eyes as he moves the shower around her head. He has some trouble opening the bottle of Femme Fatale [...] The bathroom fills with a potent fragrance [...] Shiv smears the shampoo overhead, then massages her scalp with it [...] He works the lather down the length of her hair [...] His eyes dart to the stiff nipples visible under her T-shirt [...] half ashamed. (In Times of Siege, pp. 37–38)

Meena is a student of Sociology researching on women's stories – mainly women affected by the anti-Sikh riots post Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. This points towards the novelist's interconnection of the central perception, that is, feminine standpoint in a time of crisis. The novelist's theme centres around the lives of Shiv and Meena:

Wherever Shiv is in the house, whatever he is doing, he is aware of another presence [...] She seems more worldly-wise sometimes than he [...]. Though she lies in bed [...] she does not seem aware of her powerlessness. (In Times of Siege, pp. 30–31)

Githa Hariharan's message is centralized around the term 'powerlessness', which displays that in the twenty-first century women have traversed the obstacle of patriarchy. They are self-made and have superior mental strength, thereby proving to be equal to men. Meena's

strong point is in her asking Shiv not to tell her parents about her broken leg. A young woman usually finds it hard to stay away from her parents and Meena is comfortable doing so. She has no qualms being alone together.

Githa Hariharan's new-age feminism is not about the eradication of differences between the sexes or the attainment of equal prospects, but rather concerns the individual's rights to identify one and be comfortable in one's own skin.

The chief psychological consistencies between the sexes include women's emotive uncertainty, greater acceptance for tiresome details, inability for intellectual thought and proneness to submission. The feminist mindfulness is to identify oneself as the victim to the power of men in society and the system. However, modern day feminists are against masculinist hierarchy but are firm believers of sexual dichotomy. They are pro-woman but not anti-man. This fact is clearly represented in Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Siege*.

Githa Hariharan illustrates in this novel how women are superior to men like Shiv. Meena is like a courageous tigress full of plans to destroy the intentions of the enemy. Rekha, Shiv's wife, is another heroine of the modern age. She chooses to go abroad with her daughter without any apprehension about her husband. She is fully proficient of setting things right:

The backyard was a Jungle of thorny shrubs and weeds, the kind that spread like an army advancing forward day by day. Rekha was dismayed, but Shiva could tell she was also energated by the challenge. He saw a look on her face that he imagines many of the conquerors of Delhi have shared: a gleam that assesses the strength of the enemy, and the spoils to be won. The kind of hungry look that wants to colonize as for as the eye can see, clear and rearrange spaces and lives. (In Times of Siege, pp. 57–58)

Both these women are born fighters. Thus, Githa Hariharan specifies that the Indian woman is not a crying, desperate, stranded woman. She is a superwoman in her own right. Meena

voices the sentiments of her generation as an individualist feminist. Both Meena and Rekha represent the modern idea of Indian women who have their own beliefs and feelings and are not uncomfortable living alone away from their families.

Feminist attitude in *Fugitive Histories* is suggested for women who were left unaccompanied to fend for themselves during the holocaust in Gujarat in 2002. The novel discloses the inheritance of prejudice and the status of Muslim women in the police station. It also gives an illustration of how Muslims are extremely afraid of their lives. It also gives a intense portrait of suffering and hate, with others seeking relief in private dreams and heroic hopes. Through these, Githa Hariharan has depicted the feministic vision in the novel. The most spectacular situation and the dishonor of a woman comes out, as in the police station scene.

The first policeman leans back in his chair and stares at Ammi as if she is naked. As if she is not wearing a Sari, a burqa thrown over it so only her face and feet are visible.
(*Fugitive Histories*, p. 134)

The second policeman snarls:

'What's your son's name?' 'Akbar', Ammi says again, thought they have given their son's name at least ten times.

'Akbar what? Mohammad? Ahmad?'

'The names become ugly taunts in the policeman's mouth' [...] and when Ammi says, 'He's in college, second year BSc' [...] then, there is a terrible smile on his face. 'College? Why didn't you say earlier?' [...] 'he growls with satisfactions. Too many of you in college it seems,' [...] and adds sarcastically: 'Has he eloped with a Hindu girl? Or left home to join the terrorists?' [...] When Ammi adds: 'He's just a boy's [...]' 'Just a student. He does not know anything about politics' 'The policemen look at each other and burst into laughter.' With rock respect the second policeman says,

'Begum', 'this is probably what Osama Bin Laden's mother says of him'. (Fugitive Histories, p. 134)

The aforementioned scene brings out the fact that the government was hand in glove in carrying out the Muslim massacre during the 2002 riots. Githa Hariharan has shown that Yasmin is brave to live her life in her own despite her brother Akbar being lost and their house having been burnt:

They were so tired they wanted to sleep and never get up, but sleep refused to come anywhere near them. (Fugitive Histories, p. 138)

The general hatred of the Hindus for Muslims is articulated:

Muslims Quite India-or we will fuck your mothers. (Fugitive Histories, p. 138)

Muslim in India have two places: Pakistan and Kabristan. (Fugitive Histories, p. 192).

Therefore,

They had to quit their neighborhood, their India. They found a safe house in a Muslim neighbourhood, but in return the safe house made them give up their house, their old life. (Fugitive Histories, p. 138).

Their father forgets reality and is struck by Alzheimer's disease. Thus:

Akbar, the house, the stop, their lives-these can't be memories because they are with her, with them, all the time. (Fugitive Histories, p. 144).

It is by providence that Yasmin is saved being raped; later it is revealed that Sara is both Hindu and Muslim at the same time. She revels in all festivals with equal enthusiasm. However, Samar has become a Muslim out of malice. Asad tells Sara to fill in the form and declare her religion:

Don't be ashamed who you are [...] you are not. Really, he was as bad as Gandhi, his answer was never straight even when the question was [...] All Sara can be is a

woman, she has no name, or religion race or caste or natives land. (Fugitive Histories, p. 180)

Sara is a self-made woman. She works at an NGO and visits troubled areas. She is a single-parent daughter. Her mother senses her unhappiness and misunderstanding. Sara does not want to make her mother unhappy by telling all about Yasmin's despair. Sara is very happy being hybrid. In India, it is the need of the hour. Religion has become just an artificial, shallow baggage.

Githa Hariharan's finely portrays that women in today's world are always at risk:

Laila's smile is missing [...] she looks up into the camera, startled, as it its flash has brought her back with a jolt to the house that she will soon be leaving behind. (Fugitive Histories, p. 191).

Moreover, the redness in her eyes reveal the horror in her. [...] she can share that final critical moment, see that woman who is no longer a girl she once knew but a screaming red mouth, were meat for the red mouth of fire. (Fugitive Histories, p. 192).

Githa Hariharan is a significant star among women writers. Her practical ideas are presented in a captivating way. Githa Hariharan's vision of life is truly liberal and her thematic likenesses are related to the new way of life.

Githa Hariharan has concentrated on gender equivalence and freedom of women in a traditional social structure of Indian society. Her attitude is thus equally well, progressive and open-minded.

Hariharan has tried to signify her characters free from fear by pointing her protest against the Hindu militant. Feminism arises when women obtain dissimilar treatment under the law because they are women. It arises when women are either burdened or advantaged based upon their sex. Githa Hariharan has precisely emphasized that violence against women

remains relentless even in the twenty-first century. The need of the hour is to deliberate, discourse and most importantly, act in order to stop this gross violation of one-half of the population.

Conclusion

The Thousand Faces of Night portrays the misfortune of women, who in their inward mind respond to the expressions from the servitude of male authority. Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* focuses on feminist elements. The novel displays the confined space assigned to Indian women in the socio-cultural hierarchy. Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* is a mirror to observe the cultural, political and historical authenticities of India. She materializes as a writer with political and feminine cognizance. The feminism in this novel is exceptional. In *Fugitive Histories*, women always have to bear the brunt of hatred, and violence in society has more impact on women. Victims of war and unrest are primarily women, but they are also the ones that emerge stronger and bolder. Hariharan produces rich and multifaceted characters with empathy. We may not always approve of these characters, but we can appreciate them. This amalgamation of the personal and the political is the highlight of the story, and helps to weave magic. Githa Hariharan's novels display the suppression and overpowering of women in a male-dominated society. The protagonists of her novels are trying to halt the silence of travails and anguish. Their suppression has left them unreasonably strong, and they are all prepared to free themselves from the restraints of various revolting traditions.

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