

Cultural Identity and Modern Self-identity in the Novels of Githa Hariharan

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Abstract:

Githa Hariharan is an accomplished feminist author. Her 1992 debut novel, The Thousand Faces of Night, was awarded the 1993 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best debut novel. Caste, religion, brutality, and ethnicity all pose obstacles to the identities of the female protagonists in her works. This study examines and evaluates how Hariharan's female characters confront the traditional roles and identities imposed on them by a male-dominated social order as they struggle to reconstruct a modern self-identity. This paper examines her novels The Thousand Faces of Night, The Ghost of Vasu Master, and Fugitive Histories in depth for this purpose.

Keywords: socio-psychological explanations, language and culture, identity crisis, traditional roles, ethnicity, caste, religion, etc.,

Numerous definitions exist for the term culture. There are sociological, psychological, and philosophical explanations, as well as political and historical explanations. Culture is a difficult topic to define. According to Brown, culture is a way of life. It is the environment in which we exist, think, feel, and interact with others. It is the adhesive that holds a group together" (As cited in Ennaji, Moha, 20). Contemporary anthropologists are interested in the connection between language and culture. The worldviews and civilizations of speakers of various languages would be distinct. According to Hudson, "culture is something everyone has" for cultural anthropologists (Hudson, 1980: 73). In his book Life Cycles and Lifeways: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, W. H. Oswalt defines culture as the acquired and shared behavioural patterns that define a group of individuals. In addition to learning about your culture via family members and other members of your society, you also learn about it from various material forms such as books and television programmes. You are born with the ability to acquire culture through observation, imitation, and trial and error, but not with culture itself. (Oswalt, 1986: 25)

Culture can also be viewed as an essential component of one's world understanding. Thus, culture can be understood as a multidimensional entity. The major components of culture are language, norms, traditions, customs, the system of beliefs, values, artefacts, knowledge, and other human behaviours.

Definition of Identity

The concept of women's identity is one of the most debatable topics in contemporary Indian women's writing. The identity of women is regulated and governed by numerous behaviours and ideologies. They exploit women's lives and bodies. Religion and culture attempt to establish a woman's identity. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition), the term "identity" refers to "who a person is or the distinguishing characteristics of a person or organisation." According to this definition, identity describes who a person is as well as his or her attributes, abilities, and capabilities, regardless of gender. However, this is not the case for females. She is identified by others as opposed to being given the chance to identify herself.

Sociolinguistic theory has long struggled with the issue of identity. Nonetheless, the phrase has shifted from identity as a problem to the type of problem that identity is regarded as. According to Saadawi, "identification is a discourse, and it is vital to know who is using it, who makes decisions, who labels me, what all this interest in "cultural identity" means, and where it leads [...]." I have attempted to describe my identity [...] But we are so preoccupied with establishing our identities when they are constantly changing" (1997: 118-126).

Heinz Lichtenstein declares identity is a fundamental need. According to him, "identity loss is a uniquely human threat, and identity maintenance is a uniquely human imperative" (78). Woodward has added to the concept of identity that "identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources— from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, and gender [...It] gives us a place in the world and serves as the link between ourselves and the society in which we live [...]" Frequently, [it] is best described by its distinctions, or by what it is not (Woodward, 1997.1-2).

This multiplicity of identities involves the fact that individuals have multiple social and cultural identities, which they combine in certain ways. There are several shared identities which frequently blend smoothly, such as Anglo-Indian, Franco-German, Afro-American, etc. "Far

from being anchored in a mere 'recovery' of the past," argues Hall, "mixed identities are the various ways in which we are positioned by and place ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990: 223)

According to Fishman, identity is "the dynamic link between the ancestral heritage, with all of its components (oral tradition, literature, beliefs, etc.), and the language(s) that give rise to a particular cultural identity." Fishman has recently added the observation that "cultural identity extends to all repercussions [...] of the social, psychological, economic, political, and cultural exchanges inside and between human groupings" (Fishman, 1999:3).

Erik Erikson, an American-German psychologist, defined identity as "a mutual relation in that it implies both a constant sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a permanent sharing of some sort of basic character with others." (Erikson, 1959:109) In 'Identity and the Life Cycle,' he explains the theory of psychosocial development of an individual by presenting eight stages from infancy to adulthood. He is also famous for coining the phrase 'identity crisis.'

Thousands Faces of Night

The novel depicts numerous mythological and actual female characters. It is a story of diverse aspirations and frustrations, wishes and suffering, and the search for identity. Hariharan has utilised myth and religion to illustrate the innate ethos and culture of Indian society. In this work, the ethics and customs of the Hindu culture play a significant part. It is the tale of three female protagonists, Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, and their search for individuality. Their expectations for married life are extremely high, but they experience unexpected sorrow and disappointment.

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen describes "problems of discrimination against women in the development process, on survivorship differentials between men and women under conditions of social discrimination against women, and on women's agency in the process of social development" in his essay "Many Faces of Gender Inequality" (Sen, 2001).

Sen identifies seven categories of inequality in his essay: mortality inequality, natality disparity, basic facility inequality, special opportunity inequality, professional inequality, ownership inequality, and household inequality. Irrespective of religion, caste, or social standing, the obstacles and challenges women face are universal. Economically, women are

not treated equally with males; socially and culturally, they are likewise bereft of influence. In patriarchal societies, prejudice between men and women manifests in a variety of ways. Women are not economically equal to men. Culturally, woman does not receive the same treatment and rights as her male counterpart. Socially, she lacks authority and decision-making authority within the family.

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, married characters experience an identity problem despite adhering to social rules. "Feminism is a Mahabharata in which women fight their own wars and become the victims of their own goals, humanity, arrogance, and submission" (Khan, 1995: 135). In a Hindu cultural culture, the three significant characters Devi, Sita, and Mayamma reside.

In Indian culture, daughters are raised to think that their parents' home is transient and that their husband's house will eventually become their permanent dwelling. When a daughter is married, her parents treat her like an honoured guest. When a married daughter leaves her husband's home permanently and returns to her parents' home, it becomes a source of humiliation and grief for the family's reputation. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, "it is the oppressive presence of the mother as a social figure in a patriarchal setting" (Ravi, 1999:80) that causes the protagonist to question herself. Devi fails to establish her identity as a bride in an arranged marriage or as a rebellious lover within the framework of male-dominated social norms. She elopes with her lover Gopal from her husband's home and ultimately returns to her mother, leaving him behind. Devi discovers that Dan, Mahesh, and Gopal wish for her to assume their identities. Devi is raised in a cultural society that expects her to be a decent woman who fuses her identity with that of the guy in her life. When Devi realises that men govern the world in a patriarchal society such as India and that females are nurtured with distinct expectations, she immediately leaves to discover her own identity.

Devi ultimately returns to her mother "to remain and struggle and to make sense of it all" (TFN, 139) and to restart from scratch. Devi strives to discover her own identity through her relationship with her mother. According to Pradeep Trikha, Sita's homecoming represents her final withdrawal from the male world in order to reside with her mother (Trikha, 1995:172).

Sita, Devi's mother, had to abandon her passion for music in order to become a suitable daughter-in-law. She is a symbol of sacrifice, suffering in silence while accepting the reality of

life. Her father-in-law reprimands her for playing the veena instead of performing home chores. He remarked, "Put away that veena. "Are you a wife or an in-law?" (P. 30). Under the influence of rage, she pulled out the veena's strings. "Yes," she said to her father-in-law. I am a wife. The phrase "a daughter-in-law" (TFN, 30). In the extended Hindu family, a bride's position is largely that of a daughter-in-law, not a wife, according to Damodar Rao. The in-laws and other family members look the newly-arrived bride with distrust, even as she struggles to adjust to her new circumstances and the shifting atmosphere (Rao, 1995:161). Indian ladies lack their own personality and identity. They lack artistic space and seek their identity. The Indian woman's existence depends on her husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. Through her portrayal of Sita, Githa Hariharan offers a fresh dimension to the psychological complexity of Indian women. In a society dominated by men, a woman is expected to be an ideal wife, a mother, and an amazing housekeeper, among other roles.

Mayamma is a social victim. She lacks education and is the novel's greatest sufferer. She represents the category of women who accept all that occurs to them. These ladies never complain because they have been taught that a woman's success in life rests on her ability to endure and persevere. Mayamma spent her entire life attempting to please others. The author emphasises that women have been educated throughout history to endure without protesting the myriad atrocities committed against them. She has been rendered silent for aeons. The first person to mistreat Mayamma is her husband, followed by her selfish kid. In a patriarchal societal structure, she accepts her plight and bears the weight of harshness. She is attacked when she marries a worthless gambler at age 12 and is tortured by her mother-in-law when she is unable to bear children. There are numerous examples in the story of Mayamma's mother-in-law's treatment of her. "Today, there will be no rice for you, Maya. This is Friday. No rice today, no vegetables tomorrow, and no tamarind on the following day.

Stop considering food, daughter-in-law, and consider your womb. Consider your barren, withering womb and pray" (TFN, 114). Mayamma exemplifies the debasement and cruelty inflicted upon women by their own gender.

Spirits of Vasu Master

Lakshmi Vasu Master's mother and Mangala, his wife, reflect the stereotype of traditional Indian women in the novel *The Ghost of Vasu Master*. Lakshmi and Mangala are typically

responsible for domestic responsibilities. Vasu Master and Mangala lived together for fifteen years, but he only recalls her as a shadow. Mangala delivered Vasu Master two sons, Vishnu and Venu, although he views her as "more of a hazy recollection than a person" (GVM, 41). Master Mangala is as obscure to Vasu as his mother is to him. He describes her personality as "pale and ethereal; a figure perpetually on the run." The repetitive swirl and thump of waves against rock and sand drowned out any possibility of words whenever I pictured her in my head (GVM, 41). Even in his nightmares, Vasu sees Mangala "clad in silence" and providing him with only a "partial glimpse" (GVM, 42). He does not recall her laughter. Her character is constantly surrounded by an atmosphere of stillness and mystery (GVM, 42). Her life after marriage is devoid of all enjoyment and excitement. Her daily routine consists of motherhood and marital duties. She cannot discuss her desires with Vasu Master due to their mutual respect. "In the Indian tradition, the relationship between husband and wife is not like that of friends, but that of God and worshipper." (Patil, 2011:2)

(GVM, 32) Lakshmi, the mother of Vasu Master, is the "sixth daughter of female-weary loins." She did not have a name for at least a year because her parents could not afford a naming ceremony for a second daughter. They believed people would ridicule them for failing to have a son year after year. The old sweeper woman who cleaned their garden and collected the cow manure tried to console her gloomy and silent mistress by saying, "Life might have been easier with a few extra inches of flesh, but she can still be the Lakshmi of her husband's household" (GVM, 31). Barooach asserts that gender bias is strongly embedded in India's society. Sons are considered ritually and economically desired, not only to burn the funeral pyres of their parents to free their souls from the bonds of their bodies, but also to assure the survival of the family name and lineage. They are also required to provide for their elderly parents financially (Barooach, 1999: 24).

According to Jayaprakash A. Shinde, Githa Hariharan implies that man will constantly strive to incorporate women as an extension of his own will. The realisation that she is "different than himself" is anguish for him" (Shinde, 1999:124). The character of Mangala sheds light on the personality of the Vasu teacher as well as the prevalent patriarchal system in India, in which women's ambitions, abilities, and potential are stifled and controlled. Mangala denotes the socially marginalised situation of women in India. The novel's female protagonists let us

recognise the restricted positions of Indian women in the sociocultural hierarchy. They like to live in a male-dominated society.

Figurative Histories

The novel *Fugitive Histories* by Githa Hariharan depicts the lives of three women residing in three separate places. In times of violence and religious hatred, Mala, Sara, and Yasmin face identity and cultural identity difficulties. The novel takes place against the backdrop of the 2002 post-Godhra riots between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat.

Malathi, or Mala for short, is a Brahmin from southern India. At the beginning of the tale, she is a widow seeking to discover who she is without Asad. In Delhi, she is left alone with her husband's sketches. Even as a child, she experienced loneliness and isolation. Because she was a girl, she could neither climb trees like boys nor ride a bicycle. Mala's ambition as a child was to be bold and joyful. "What she desired was a location or activity that would liberate her from her family, her house and school in the city, and her yearly summer home in the village" (FH, 14). Through Mala's childhood, the author demonstrates how a woman's desires are repressed from an early age. In patriarchal societies, boys and girls are treated differently.

Mala is unable to reside in her grandfather's prison. "I want to be someone different," says Mala (FH, 17). Mala's desire to marry Asad, a Muslim, exacerbates the tension and animosity. Because he is a Muslim, her parents grow agitated and protest to their marriage.

Her father becomes extremely enraged and asks, "How could you want to marry him?"

Consider the contrast between us and them" (FH, 69). They wail, "You're murdering us!" You'll marry this man, this foreigner, and you'll destroy us!" (FH, 69). Mala defies cultural marital conventions by marrying Asad and establishing a life with him. Mala forms her identity as a nonreligious lady and develops her work as a librarian.

When Mala gives birth to a boy, naming him presents numerous challenges.

Asad's mother advises that the boy be named Ahmed, while Mala's mother chooses Rama or Krishna, preferring Ramakrishna as "a double dose to compensate for his half-and-half heritage" (FH, 31). Mala and Asad, however, have decided to call him Samar. Mala subsequently became preoccupied with raising the child, and her suspicion that "she was only half, not the entire" diminished (FH, 32).

In *Fugitive Histories*, Sara Zaidi is the daughter of Mala and Asad and is half-Hindu and half-Muslim. She is an aspiring documentary filmmaker and social worker at an NGO in Bombay. She is raised in a family that adheres to secular beliefs. Due to her secular inheritance and mixed ancestry, she is an outcast in modern India. As adults, Sara and Samar are faced with the challenge of determining who they will be in the future. Sara is experiencing an identity crisis and desires to understand what it means to be half Hindu and half Muslim. "I have family who are Muslim and Hindu. I am neither (FH, 167)

Frequently, she is perplexed and tries to dispel these beliefs. Sometimes I believe I am Indian (FH, 167). Sara attempts to resolve her difficulty by associating her identity with her nationality. Later, as she states, "But most of the time, I'm just Sara," she discovers peace and comfort inside herself. (FH, 167) Anuradha Goyal asserts, "Though the author has articulated it in the restricted canvas of a Hindu-Muslim conflict stemming from a mixed parentage, this is an issue that all growing-up people who have many identities experience, and one that children of immigrants face most frequently." Sara, however, unlike her brother Samar, examines India's religious divide in greater depth and reveals to her mother, "I'm beginning to realise how fortunate I am. How delighted I am that I'm a hybrid" (FH, 184).

Conclusion

In *Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan attempts to "present a new sense of woman's identity that transforms her status from victimised to empowered by reconceptualizing the mother-daughter relationship," as Srilata Ravi notes (Ravi, 1997:76).

Mahesh and Gopal's relationship with Devi collapsed because they failed to recognise and connect with her soul. Devi rejects the mythological tales told by her grandma and role models in the end. She gives her life a new meaning and finds comfort in her relationship with her mother. In *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, both Lakshmi and Mangala reside in their husband's home (permanent residence) and subject to his will.

The female characters in *Fugitive Histories* offer a look into the hardships of many generations and eras within society. The novels of Githa Hariharan are devoted to feminist and social problems. India is a male-dominated society in which the individuality of women is barely acknowledged. Githa Hariharan presents a female heroine who struggles under the institution

of marriage who provokes thought. Along the path to self-identity, they encounter a variety of barriers, hardships, and sorrows.

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