

The Thousand Faces of Night: A Reading of Zero Woman and Hundred Percent Women

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Abstract:

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

Keywords: Zero-woman, Hundred percent woman, patriarchy, gender, female narrative

1. Introduction

In 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 in 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 view. Most specifically, her stories explore the relationship between women and magnify the contrast of thoughts, outlooks, and ways of life. Sex is biological, whereas gender is a social and cultural construct. Men's and women, their roles and responsibilities are determined by society. Culture and society shape a person's behavior as a man or woman. Society is not balanced, and it tends to tilt towards the powerful. Over time, males have the power to run clubs to establish codes and standards for men and women, which is biased. Although both men and women live in society, the power lies in one's hand, predominantly male. Those who follow the rules and regulations and respect the conventions are called honorable community members and shall be awarded. The males are the legislator and the supreme lawmakers, and the women 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 society, no matter

how unbearable the pain of following those. They are strict in the observance of the rules prefixed. They have a habit of sacrificing their lives for others. They do not try to shed the skin, even if it burns. They are dependent, obedient, blind, persuasive, fearful, and god-fearing. The patriarchal society calls them one hundred percent women 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 women are the women who say goodbye to the patriarchal society, its codes, and conventions and do not act as per the standard set by the patriarchal society. They dare to purify all the traces of the male-dominated culture, male thought patterns, ideas, and ideals. Instead of identifying themselves with their talents and extraordinariness, they must search for their capabilities and build themselves anew, and overall, they must cross the knowledge threshold of man. Zero is not an irrational number at all, nor is it valueless. It is the beginning, a new beginning; that is the point where one can start afresh. Zero women 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 labeled as unwomanly by the patriarchy.

Through her woman protagonists, Hariharan bravely presents the overlooked 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 the 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 to share ideas and arguments. This novel focuses on 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 and did excellently in her housewife job as an employee in her small office called Kitchen. She has sacrificed everything, her desire, ambition, and passion for music, to please her husband and family. She thinks she is doing the best a mother can do for her daughter, selecting the best. This is the same way a mother can love her daughter. However, she is not aware of the growing revolution of Devi against her, not although directly but as a symbol of a patriarchal ghost entirely 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 a long 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 artificial enclosures.” (102)

Even in Devi’s father’s prolonged absence, she still carries out his and her mother-in-law’s orders. She thinks it is victorious to stick to the old order of things, and it is the only way to bring the holiest something called happiness into life. Devi always dreamed of a

friendly mom who could listen to her and share her feelings with her. When she starts talking about her American days to her mom, she reacts very unusually.

“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 between them. Sita is a stern, decisive woman who selects everything for her daughter, and her final decision is entire.

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

Sita never thinks about Devi's goals and desires but does 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 was not interested in marriage with Srinivasan, a potential groom, her mother said-

“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 her mother-in-law; she never cares for her happiness. She has given her best to prove herself as a hundred percent woman and worthy of being rewarded with a medal inscribed with a hundred percent woman. She neither questions the pre-fixed order nor tries to change it. Instead, by carrying out all the instructions and conventions of the male-dominated society, she has become an inseparable part of that society; as a result, her thinking and 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 Vena beautifully. She has a few old photographs lying in the old cupboard of an abandoned room where she held the veena so close as if it were her lover. However, she was debarred from playing the veena, and out of her pain and frustration, she 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 per patriarchal society's standards to please others and not become herself. After living in a patriarchal society, Devi's mother has become a product of patriarchy and a leader in carrying patriarchy to the next level and generation. She sees society through 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 would be important for a marriage. She warns her husband about the girl and says that as the girl grows, she must avoid fairy tales of gods, goddesses, and fantasies because they can harm her in the 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 happiness. Devi is always taught to follow her husband and obey his orders. Because this is the ultimate way to heaven, Sita always gives her best to be a hundred percent woman. She has not been helpless after the death of her husband; instead 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 married off to a man with a handsome salary. What more can a mother do for her daughter; this thought has satisfied her. However,

she never knows what her daughter thinks. All her illusions and complacency are broken into pieces when she knows her daughter defies her orders. She never thinks her daughter will do this to her, even after the sacrifices she has made for her. There she thinks about herself, her life, her happiness, and her targets. She has put her best effort into rearing her child. All her hopes for 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 and iron-like self-control. After all those quarrels with her husband about discipline for the growing child, won through silent, ferocious struggles and sleepless nights of thorough, between-the-lines planning, the best of possible lives had been offered to her daughter. Moreover, 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 cleaning the house, the garden, and the 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 retrospect's 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 she is starting it fresh with herself today after years. After her husband's death and daughter's defiance, she might have lost her life or the essence of her life. However, she gradually understands her essence and starts her life with the veena, the music, and the revival of her interest and enthusiasm again. The woman makes the reverse journey to reach zero and begins her life. Becoming zero is victorious here, where there is no need for any male to fulfill a woman. Finally, she has reached point zero to start afresh. Her life does not end but begins anew.

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

Next comes the character Mayamma, a maidservant 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 wealthy family like Sita. She is just an ordinary woman. She has done everything throughout her life to make her husband or son happy. She has not done anything for her happiness. She has been modeled in a society where thinking about oneself is sinful. She had always tried her best to be the percent woman. A woman can only be great by tolerating her bestial husband, suffering and penance, and sacrificing everything for others. She was married earlier at the age of twelve. Her husband was vulgar 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 and jewelry and agreed to make Mayamma her daughter as she believed the astrologer's words, who promised 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 the 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, her husband is an animal and 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 a bath in the dawn in the village pond, prays, makes vows, and dips herself repeatedly in the cold water. She keeps fast; she sacrifices her favorite food and binds the crimson strips on the sacred tree dedicated to Jaganmata. She meditates hours and hours before the pan of clear water, representing the golden-complexioned Shasthi, the 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 mother-in-law and be free from 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 that 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 an 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, and 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 begin their life to make themselves a woman, one hundred percent wives, and one hundred percent daughters-in-law. But they ultimately make a reverse journey to make themselves unique and not bound to the typical woman's life. They are zero women 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 find that 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. However, little 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 in life. At first, Devi was not interested in marriage, but her mother pressured her to get married because she looked at the world through 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 for the wedding function, they are so happy because a girl is getting married.

What can be better than a girl 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 by 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 her existence's meaning while living alone and while her husband is away. She also thinks about Mahesh's bestial lust on the bed. Her father-in-law talks about a woman's role and their sacrifice by fetching stories from ancient myths and legends. Mahesh remains busy on 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, and when she tries to learn Sanskrit, she is discouraged. She follows the path 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 woman's limitations everywhere. A woman is entirely 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. The woman has no independent sacrifice, no vow, no fasting: by serving her husband, she is honored in the heavens.” (Hariharan 55)

Her loneliness has 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 housewife, daughter-in-law, and wife is the essence of a woman's life. Devi becomes introspective about her life and what kind of woman she has become. In her extended 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 the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight?” (Hariharan 74)

Everyone says motherhood is essential for a woman. She is not worthy of a woman if she does not attain motherhood. Mahesh wants a baby, but Devi questions why he needs one. Mahesh is shocked when a woman asks about the need for a baby. Devi could not conceive the baby, so Mahesh booked an appointment with a gynecologist. She learns that she cannot be a mother and gets frustrated. After that, she leaves Mahesh. Eventually, she seeks comfort in Gopal, a local but globally famous 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 imaginative, emotional refinement.” (Kundu, 120)

There also need to get more comfort and feel dominated. Devi resists the male-dominated society and its pressure on 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 at midnight without awareness of Gopal have been well portrayed by the author.

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

She thinks about her journey to discover something 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, she is going to hell.

“There may be a 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)

However, Devi has decided to make her 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 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 learned too well in girlhood, blur the bold strokes, black and white, of revenge. I write elaborate scenarios for the last act-humiliating Mahesh, saying everything 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 of women in this novel never try to change their ways of life and continue to live despite several assaults upon them. They cannot ever dare to change their life. On the other hand, the zero woman 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.

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