

MYTHICAL POWER AS PORTRAYED IN THE NOVEL *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

V. VANITHA JEYAKUMARI

Assistant Professor & Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English
KG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Dr. S. RAM MANOHAR PARI

Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English
KG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

This research paper examines the influence of myths in Gita Hariharan's novel The Thousand Faces of Night. The narrative follows Devi, the protagonist, whose life is profoundly shaped by the mythical stories recounted by her grandmother. Utilizing psychoanalytical theory, the paper delves into Devi's mental transformation, emphasizing how these stories, embedded in her subconscious, resurface consciously when she encounters similar situations in her own life. For instance, when Devi's mother organizes a swayamvara for her, Devi recalls the tale of Damayanthi—a story her grandmother once shared. This study argues that while Devi herself does not actively change, these myths deeply impact her subconscious, ultimately driving internal shifts. The story of Damayanthi, for example, significantly influences her thoughts and aspirations regarding the swayamvara. Without her grandmother's narration, Devi might not have envisioned the swayamvara in the way she did. The analysis thus highlights the transformative power of myths in facilitating inner change within an individual.

Keywords: impact, myths, stories, transition, transformation, power.

Introduction

This research study delves into the profound impact of mythical stories on individuals and society. In literature, these stories are referred to as myths, a term derived from the Greek word "mythos," which signifies the tales, legends, or fictional narratives of a people. Traditionally, myths are defined as widely accepted ideas or beliefs that are incorrect or false. However, in a literary context, they encompass traditional tales aimed at explaining natural or social phenomena, often featuring supernatural elements.

Studying myths with a "time-perspective" reveals their role in presenting behavioral role models and reconnecting modern society to bygone eras through patterns of worship and conduct. Modern theorists highlight the spiritual potential of myths for individuals and societies, while contemporary theorists explore their depiction of archetypes and mental patterns, often in relation to opposites like good and evil or virtue and vice.

Gita Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a rich tapestry of Indian myths. Divided into three parts, the novel intricately weaves these stories into the

protagonist Devi's life. Having returned to Madras with an American degree, Devi finds herself drawn back into traditional societal norms. She recalls the mythical tales shared by her grandmother, aligning them with her own thoughts and life events. These narratives enable Devi to relate the experiences of mythical heroines to her contemporary challenges, ultimately empowering her to break free from societal constraints. Through the lives of her mother, Sita, and their maid, Mayamma, Devi observes the compromises women make to achieve marital stability, gaining insight into their resilience.

Devi's Life Intertwined with Legends and Myths

In this novel, the protagonist Devi's life stands apart. Despite studying in America, where many individuals adopt unique lifestyles and prove themselves as distinct, Devi does not follow this path. Her mother, Sita, embodies traditional values and feels a deep concern that Devi might independently choose a life partner during her time abroad. To prevent this, Sita swiftly arranges a

swayamvara upon Devi's return, driven by her apprehensions as a traditional mother.

"With the same eloquent hand, my mother prepared me for my swayamvara." (pg. 16)

Devi reminisced about the many afternoons spent with her grandmother in the Agraharam during her childhood, particularly when she was six years old. Her grandmother would share an array of mythological tales—stories that were far from ordinary bedtime narratives, crafted for special occasions. One such tale revolved around the feast of a bride's choice, highlighting the grace and grandeur of a swayamvara. Her grandmother recounted the story of Princess Damayanti, who prepared for her swayamvara with the help of her maids, using fragrant oils, a paste of rice powder, turmeric, and sandalwood. Damayanti's body was then dried with silk, transforming her into a vision of beauty.

Young Devi, captivated by the tale, asked her grandmother if she would also grow up to be as radiant as Damayanti. Her grandmother reassured her, promising to anoint her with coconut oil and turmeric to make her a "pale princess." The story of Damayanti continued, painting vivid imagery of the princess's preparation for her swayamvara, leaving a profound impact on Devi's young mind.

"Her heart, loyal and steadfast, never wavered from the path leading to Nala, the king of the Nishadas, and her feet, adorned with gold rings and henna, were sure of their destination." (pg. 20)

At the age of six, Devi listened to the story of Damayanti from her grandmother, a tale that deeply imprinted itself on her young mind. Even after returning from America, Devi's thoughts and outlook remained rooted in the myths she had learned in her childhood, rather than reflecting the typical mindset of an American-educated individual. When her mother began preparations for her swayamvara, Devi's mind immediately returned to the story her grandmother had told her. This demonstrates the profound influence of myths, as the tale of Damayanti, stored in her subconscious since childhood, came to life and shaped her understanding of selecting a groom.

Devi envisioned herself as Damayanti, eagerly anticipating her swayamvara and meeting her prospective bridegroom. However, the reality fell far short of her

expectations, as the parents arrived without their son, leaving her greatly disappointed. The events did not align with the grandeur she had imagined, inspired by the mythological swayamvara of Damayanti. Despite her education, Devi's life continued to be deeply influenced by myths, guiding her thoughts and actions. She drew parallels between her life and the lives of mythological heroines. Over the span of three months, Devi met six prospective bridegrooms, yet the weight of mythological expectations persisted.

Her grandmother also told her the story of Gandhari as an example for a real woman.

"Gandhari brushed aside the maid closest to her and walked to her husband with quick, impatient steps. He stood by the window, his noble head looking up at the sky. But when he turned around, she saw the white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless" (pg. 28-29)

Her husband was blind, and as a gesture of strength and devotion, she chose to close her eyes as well, refusing to witness a world her husband could not see. In contrast, a modern woman might decide to become her husband's eyes, guiding and describing the world to him. Devi's grandmother imparted powerful lessons about the importance of women through her stories, emphasizing how women often sacrificed their desires for the well-being of their families. These narratives took root in Devi's memory and gradually influenced her perspective, teaching her to make decisions with the wisdom of mythical figures like Damayanti and Gandhari. However, Devi refused to completely forgo her own aspirations, unlike her mother or her maid.

While Devi admired the qualities of Damayanti and Gandhari, she struggled to emulate them in reality. Their myths had a profound impact on her, sparking a transition in her understanding of life. At the age of six, she had aspired to be like them, but as she grew older, she realized that their ideals did not align with the challenges of her modern life. The myths, however, continued to resonate with her, shaping her thoughts and guiding her decisions. Without these stories, Devi might have led a life similar to other women, unshaped by the strength and wisdom drawn from mythical heroines.

Devi's grandmother shared stories about her mother, Sita, painting a picture of her life as a young bride. Sita

was exceptionally skilled at playing the veena, a talent she cherished deeply. However, one day, while playing the veena, her music interrupted her grandfather's prayers, prompting an angry outburst from him. From that moment on, Sita abandoned her veena entirely, demonstrating her commitment to fulfilling the traditional roles of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. In many ways, Sita embodied the qualities of Gandhari, another mythical figure renowned for her sacrifices.

Through summers spent with her grandmother, Devi learned about the omnipotent power of gods and goddesses and began to imagine herself as a mythical warrior—a heroine astride a tiger, battling magical demons. However, Devi's marriage to Mahesh unfolded differently. Their relationship was structured and lacked emotional warmth. Mahesh sought intimacy with Devi solely to fulfill his desire for a child, a dynamic that left Devi disheartened. She longed for a husband who would genuinely love her and devote his time to her, rather than viewing her as merely a means to an end. This approach felt to her like a demand on her physical being, devoid of the love she craved.

"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;"(pg. 74)

The *thali* holds profound cultural significance in Indian traditions. When a woman is adorned with a *thali*, it symbolizes her marital bond and traditionally signifies her duty to follow and respect her husband in every aspect of life. Devi encountered Gopal, a neighbor and singer, but her interactions with him brought no happiness. This dissatisfaction led Devi to make a decisive choice—to abandon her current life and return to her mother. As she prepared to leave, her mind was filled with thoughts of divine figures such as Sati, Parvati, Haimavati, Gauri, Durga, and Kali. In that moment, Devi realized she was not destined to be a conqueror. Observing Gopal groaning in his sleep, lying still and silent like death, solidified her decision to leave. Without hesitation, Devi departed, embarking on a journey to Madras and leaving behind her marriage.

Determined to live a life true to her own dreams, Devi found acceptance in her mother, Sita, who encouraged her

bold choice. Sita, in turn, reclaimed her veena—a symbol of her own long-abandoned aspirations. This transformation marked a turning point for both women, inspired by the strength and courage of mythical heroines. Just as these legendary figures made bold decisions, Sita and Devi embraced their own power to shape their lives, breaking free from societal constraints to pursue their desires.

Conclusion

The influence of her grandmother's stories is profoundly evident in Devi's life. These tales, often tied to specific occasions, became deeply ingrained in her mind. As Devi matured, she began to draw connections between these myths and the events in her own life. Every individual she encountered and every situation she faced seemed to breathe life into those mythical narratives, aligning their patterns with her own experiences. While it may appear that Devi simply recalls these stories, the reality is that myths possess an intrinsic power to shape one's life. When individuals find themselves in situations reminiscent of myths, they can feel the resonance of those tales. The hero or heroine from these stories has the potential to inspire change within them. This change may take different forms—either motivating them to emulate the actions of the mythical figures or, conversely, prompting them to choose a path opposite to that of the hero or heroine. It is evident that if Devi had not listened to the stories shared by her grandmother, she would not have drawn parallels between her life and those of mythical heroines. Without these tales, she might have led a simple, ordinary life. It seems almost destined that Devi was meant to hear these stories, which left a lasting impact on her and shaped her decisions. Her awareness of these heroic women instilled in her a sense of courage and brought about profound changes in her outlook. The strength of these characters empowered Devi to be bold and unconcerned with others' opinions. For instance, Gandhari made her decisions independently, without consulting even her parents. In contrast, in today's world, it is not uncommon for women to seek permission from their families to make choices in their marriages. Modern women, however, are not always like Damayanti, Gandhari, or even Devi. Remarkably, both Devi and her mother, Sita, emerge as heroic figures in contemporary society. Many scholars have studied this

novel, highlighting the enduring relevance of myths. For example, in the thesis titled "The Use of Myth in *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Immortals of Meluha*, and *Leave It to Me*" by Bindu Madhavi B (accessible at <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/616760>), myths are shown to encapsulate the timeless journey and ultimate destiny of every individual. Through Devi and her mother Sita, we witness how these narratives reveal profound truths about life and self-discovery. The thesis 'Myth Society and Identity A Study of Githa

Hariharan's Selected Novels' accessible at <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/304055> also helps my study.

Works Cited

1. Hariharan, Gita. (1992). *The thousand faces of night*. Penguin Books.
2. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-are-myths-definition-types-examples.html>
3. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/616760>
4. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/304055>