

## NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE *THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

**Meenakshi**

*PhD Scholar*

*Deptt. of Eng. & Foreign Languages,  
M.D.U. Rohtak.*

### ABSTRACT

*Narratology tries to study how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling. Githa Hariharan's use of frequent myths, legends and stories provides the scope to read her debut novel The Thousand Faces of Night for the purpose of exploring its narrative structure. The novel has been divided into three parts, and every part has been further divided into three chapters each. It revolves around three women characters – Devi, Sita and Mayamma. The main plot advances as Devi endures a marriage full of loneliness and suffocation. Second important element of narrative structure is the organization of the events in the plot. What devices the author uses to put things in right place in his/her narrative are studied under this point. Hariharan has also made use of parallels and contrasts to bring together the narrative which on the surface seems to be a scattering of stories. All the stories in the sub-plots are either parallel or in contrast to each other. A significant part of a narrative is the narrator. Though the narrative of The Thousand Faces of Night starts as well as ends with third-person narrators, it keeps shifting alternatively from first-person narrator to third-person in the chapters in between. The theme which drives the plot of this novel is the subtle and everyday way in which women are bludgeoned to play male-scripted subordinate roles. It is revealed that the story of the novel has been given in fragments, yet the novel manages to tell a fabulous story. The reading process is split into two between the narrative and the non-narrative passages. In the intervals, the narrator inserts pieces of totally different stories and anecdotes, which do not have a direct attachment to the main focus of the narrative.*

What is it that makes all the films based on the life-story of a single person so different? What makes a simple story different from a work of narrative fiction? It is narrative which makes story different from plot – the way a story has been told, the way events have been organized and presented. A branch of structuralism, called Narratology tries to study how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling. It differentiates story from plot along these lines: “Stories are actual sequence of events as they happen whereas plot contains events as they are edited, observed, packaged and presented in what we

recognize as a narrative” (Barry, 215). According to Bal, “a narrative text is a text in which an agent relates (‘tells’) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or in combination thereof” (Bal, 5). It may begin somewhere in the middle of a chain of events and may then backtrack, providing us with a flashback. Plot may also have elements of a flash-forward hinting at events which will happen later. The distinction between story and plot is fundamental to narratology.

Narratology is a recent theoretical approach which aims to develop a methodology for the analysis of narrative texts. The term “narratology” was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969. Earlier, Russian Formalists Boris Thomashvsky, Victor Shklovsky and Boris Eichenbaum had provided formalist concepts such as *fabula*, *sjuzet*, defamiliarization and motivation; their ideas became influential when their essays were published in 1965 in English in the volume ‘Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays’. However, the development of narratology as a theoretical approach emerged with the contribution of more recent structuralist critics. Among the forerunners, Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse* (1972) made an important contribution to narratology. He especially focused on time, narrative levels, and focalization. He also tried to establish a narratological terminology. Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse* (1978) focused on narrative units such as events, characters, point of view, and narration. Gerald Prince followed the course to build up a systematic field of research and application by offering a construction of narrative grammar, and especially by compiling a dictionary of narratology.

Narratology’s primary task is the elaboration of instruments, leading to the explicit description of narratives and the comprehension of their functioning. Githa Hariharan’s use of frequent myths, legends and stories provides the scope to read her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* for the purpose of exploring its narrative structure. The novel written in 1992 received the coveted Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the best first book in 1993. Her other novels include *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). A collection of stories *The Art of Dying* was published in 1993, and a book of stories for children *The Winning Team* in 2004. She has also edited a book of stories in English translated from South Indian languages *A Southern Harvest* (1993) and co-edited a collection of stories for children *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997).

To analyze a narrative one needs to break down the plot elements, sort out the sequence of events and recognize how the narrative points of view influence the story-telling. For a systematic study of the novel, the paper will discuss all these elements one by one. Talking about the plot first,. The novel has been divided into three parts, and every part has been further divided into three chapters each. It revolves around three women characters – Devi, the protagonist; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the maidservant. These three characters have lived completely different sorts of lives. The story starts in *media res* i.e. the events going to happen to Devi have a bearing to what her past is made up of

which is discussed later in the narrative. In the beginning of the novel, she is a young and confident woman living in America who is in a relationship with a Black man Dan. Her mother has asked her to come back to India so that she can arrange a suitable marriage for her. Devi agrees to get married but here she starts recollecting the myths and legends told by her grandmother and also begins to decode the meaning and implications of those stories: "I had, of course, to respond to my grandmother's years of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment with a story of my own. It was impossible to hear her stories year after year, stories of a womanhood I would soon grow into, without insinuating myself on to that fantastic canvas" (Hariharan, 40). Thus the stories told by grandmother form a backstory to the main plot pertaining to the life of the protagonist.

The main plot advances as Devi endures a marriage full of loneliness and suffocation:

. . . this then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood (54).

Devi seeks for a relief from boredom in Baba's stories and when Baba leaves for New York, this gap is filled by Mayamma's stories. The twist in the plot comes when Gopal enters the story. Devi tries to find refuge in his music and runs away to be with him and his music. This is the point of climax in the point which changes everything else and is linked to every character present in the story.

Second important part of the plot is Sita who was an accomplished musician in her youth. Her husband had selected her for marriage keeping in view her talent only. The point of conflict in her story comes when her father-in-law scolds her for playing *veena* and instructs her to be an ideal daughter-in-law. At this point, she forsakes *veena* and directs her life towards becoming a perfect housewife. Second twist comes in her story when Devi defies her upbringing and runs away from her husband's home. Sita feels induced to introspect, and after coping with her own anger, she decides to steer back to her craze – her *veena*.

Third important part of the main plot is Maya whom everybody calls Mayamma. She is an old maidservant at Mahesh's home. There is no twist in the story of her life as she does nothing rebellious and puts up with the violence all through her life: "She had coveted birth, endured life, nursed death" (136). But her character has been introduced in

the main plot to play a significant part in the execution of climax. She and her stories implicate a persuasion to Devi's running away from home.

First three chapters falling under part one of the novel are full of mythical stories told by yet another character Pati – Devi's grandmother. Pati serves as a framing device for all the mythical stories that occur in the narrative. She serves as a medium which connects the mythical and real worlds of Devi. Hence the novel has a multi-layered plot. Stories of three main characters run the main plot but these stories themselves are full of many sub-plots made up of myths, legends and stories of real women.

The conflicts of the inner life of all the three main characters have been resolved by one event only i.e. Devi's running away with Gopal. This event compels Sita to ponder over the decisions she made in her life and the way she brought up Devi which culminates in her going back to her passion, her veena. This event is the only point of departure from the otherwise gory and submissive past of Mayamma as she sees herself liberated through this event. This episode also serves as an eye-opener to Devi as she finally realizes what she really is in quest of. The plot has a non-linear narrative structure which has not been presented in chronological order.

Second important element of narrative structure is the organization of the events in the plot. What devices the author uses to put things in right place in his/her narrative are studied under this point. In this novel, Hariharan makes use of foreshadowing, parallels and contrasts most of the times. There are some events which foreshadow or implicate towards some events occurring later in the narrative. Once Baba chided Devi for depending too much on him for her happiness: "... whatever is dependent on others is misery; whatever rests on oneself is happiness; this in brief is the definition of happiness and misery" (68). This advice foreshadows the realization by Devi towards the end of the novel that what she is in search of does not depend upon any husband or any lover. Another instance of foreshadowing is the scene between Mahesh and Devi where he throws away the book she had been reading: "... did your mother need books to tell her how to be a wife? I have never met a woman more efficient than your mother" (70). This scene foreshadows an event which is reported later in the narrative i.e. the scene in which Sita's father-in-law asks her to leave veena in order to become a good daughter-in-law, a good wife. One more instance is the wise "saying" uttered by Pati: "Because a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning"(20). This utterance foreshadows the story of Lakshmiamma told by Mayamma later. Lakshmiamma, an old woman who has been forsaken by her son, gets back to him by feigning madness:

But she sat on, unconcerned, stonily silent, stark naked. An hour later, four old women shooed her inside. They chanted mantrams, exorcized the demon, and covered her body. A few weeks later, the son arrived, looking shifty.

Lakshmiamma followed him to the bus stop, meek and silent. But the villagers swore they saw a half-smile of triumph on her face.(125-126)

Hariharan has also made use of parallels and contrasts to bring together the narrative which on the surface seems to be a scattering of stories. All the stories in the sub-plots are either parallel or in contrast to each other. For example, Pati's stories are designed to be told on particular occasions. She has a story in answer to every question of Devi. To explain the subjugation of women and all other troubles endured by women, she tells the little girl stories upon stories. To explain the sacrifice made by Sita, Pati presents a parallel in the form of Draupadi's story. To explain the fate met by Gauri, she tells her the story of a girl marrying a snake who after marriage turns into a handsome man. A departure from sacrificial stories comes when she tells Devi stories of women avengers which too is a parallel to Uma's life.

The narrative does not dwell upon the parallels alone. It presents a variety in the form of contrasts too and makes it beautiful. The conflict Devi is going through has been described through a dream that is in sharp contrast to the life she is living: "That night I dreamt of flying again. I flew swiftly, the globe of green and brown and blue maps whizzing past far below. I flew into a castle and when my feet touched ramparts, I could fly no more" (57). Baba's stories about womanhood and wives are in sharp contrast to the way his wife actually is, who has left him in search of God: "the housewife 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 does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does" (70-71). Another contrast has been presented in the form of Devi's dreams which also are a symbol of her conflict:

In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears, and that accused desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood, blur the blood strokes, black and white, of revenge. I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act – humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with. In the other scenarios I am the benevolent goddess, above mortal indignities and cravings. (95)

There is also a contrast between the image of Mayamma worshipping idols in the *puja*-room and the rest of the rooms which have been left empty by their mistresses who ironically have been named after goddesses: "So many rooms shut forever. It is harder to clean the ghost-filled rooms that have no use. Parvatiamma's room that rang with the sound of little cumbals and bhajans. The large, book-filled room. He too is gone, the silent, wise one, who was foolish enough to let his wife slip away. Now the child's" (118).



A significant part of a narrative is the narrator. Though the narrative of *The Thousand Faces of Night* starts as well as ends with third-person narrators, it keeps shifting alternatively from first-person narrator to third-person in the chapters in between. What makes the novel's narrative structure distinct is the use of polymodalities i.e. the focalization changes frequently. The type of point of view adopted affects the events, their recounting and the reader's processing and interpretation of them. When an external point of view is used, it is up to the reader to assess the feelings of the characters and the meanings of their action. If a fixed internal point of view be used, the reader should determine whether or not it distorts the narrated. Should a multiple internal point of view be used, it is up to the reader to find out which account is the closest to the truth. As far as this novel is concerned, it uses the technique of multiple internal point of view which makes it an interesting read.

The narrative has been set in Madras, America and a small village where Devi's grandmother lives. Setting too sees contrast in the form of life at village and life in city: "It occurs to me now that there couldn't have been more than five or six people in her household during our annual visits. But after her large, silent house in Madras, whereas nobody would have guessed a small child lived, my grandmother's little house, stuck to similar houses on either side, seemed to throb with life" (26). Time too has been dealt with deftly as it moves from past to present and vice-versa. A parallel in time appears when Devi, leaving Gopal back, returns to her mother in the same way she had returned from America leaving Dan back: "It was Diwali time again, just as it had been when she had returned from America" (139).

Another important part of a narrative is the theme which binds together the narrative and which the author embeds in the text. The theme which drives the plot of this novel is the subtle and everyday way in which women are bludgeoned to play male-scripted subordinate roles. The theme of construction of culture through myths and story is also one of the main themes of the piece. The theme of "cultured" femininity has been displayed by various stories told by Pati which draw a parallel between the lives of the women of the past and the present times. She tells Devi the story of Damyanti in order to inculcate the notion of *swayamvara*. But as Pati grows old, the stories take a sharp turn from sacrificial women to avenger women as if Pati has known through her lifelong experience that sacrifices bring no fruit to women. Even Baba's stories have been used to push forward the "cultured" womanhood as he keeps on recounting legends of great wives:

Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits. His stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear. They make one point in concise terms: that the saints lived according to the laws of time-tested tradition. His stories are never flabby

with ambiguity, or even fantasy; a little magic perhaps, but nothing beyond the strictly functional. They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife. (51)

Theme of feeling alienated in a group of people of different culture has also been dealt with right in the beginning as well as the closing chapter of the novel. Earlier it was Dan to please whom she bears racial remarks of his friends and relatives; now it is Gopal whose friends and fans keep on making adverse comments on her. She feels alienated in both the situations.

The novel is full of imagery as far as its stylistic part is concerned – visual, audible as well as gustatory. In part two, chapter one Hariharan presents the image of colours that represent men and women: “Then, as now, his eyes looked straight ahead, as if equipped with a camera that would only produce sharp, mercilessly clear pictures. Only black and white, didactic contrasts, no fuzzy, hesitant, self-doubting greys, pinks, lilacs” (60). Another image that of one tree giving place to another works as a device to convey that the void in their marriage which was filled by Baba’s and Mayamma’s stories – “Jacaranda”, after Baba’s death was being filled by Gopal and his music – “Gulmohur”(85). Another image she presents is that of an ivy which represents the upbringing of a daughter by a mother:

Sita had this pulled out so that a young jasmine creeper could climb more easily, in long, graceful, horizontal sweeps . . . left to their own devices, many climbers quickly become a tangled mass of growths, new shoots clinging to, or twining around, older ones; instead of neatly covering the supports provided, and filling their allotted spaces. Sita would start the new shoots off in the right direction, well before the possibility of any rebellion. Then she would check everyday to see that it grew almost horizontally: a difficult, painstaking job, since the natural growth of the plant is upward.(98)

Her use of imagery of eating bitter-sweet jackfruit while listening to the mythical stories is also an effective one. There are also instances where woman has been compared to raga by her father-in-law and the musician Gopal too.

Hariharan also makes use of a simile while indicating towards the life of a childless woman: “The tree, at least forty years old, Sita told admiring visitors, sprouted only buds, no flowers. Like a childless woman, it wore its ageless, expressionless detachment; its leaves and buds never fell, they were merely clipped with firm, unhesitating clippers” (98).The novelist has also made use of images of peacock and peahen while commenting upon the relationship between man and woman:

The male danced, ostensibly for the peahen, dowdy and offstage, blending into the background, dull brown against brown. She hardly seemed to notice what must be to her a family ritual. But two peacocks nearby responded, as

if to a signal, and they froze, then spread their feathers, flaunting them. Devi looked for the bedraggled, submissive peahen every time she herself in the mirror-studded buttons of Gopal's kurta. (129)

At the end, it is found that the three main characters have been brought together so that the reader can compare the altogether different way of their living but yielding of the same fruit. Mayamma married at an early age and encountered lust and cruelty. She had no choices and put up with turmoil all through her life. Sita, who is a talented girl, with "unfeminine determination" pays price for her ambition. She has to forsake what she measured her self-worth in – music. In the last chapter, Devi compares Sita's sacrifices and survival to that of Mayamma's. she also states the kind of difference between the pains of Sita and Mayamma:

Devi thought of her mother's years of unstinting devotion to the family. How lonely she must have been, and how brusque and suspicious she had been of Devi's hesitant overtures! Her survival, a generation away from Mayamma's, had been far more efficient, but its pain, for all its subtlety, had been just as deep, and perhaps less relenting, because she now looked back on an emptiness unfamiliar to Mayamma. (136)

Devi realizes that she has only mimed what she had been taught by her grandmother and father. Whenever she had to take decisions on her own, she had stumbled. She feels that now is the time she should take decision for her life. The conflict has been resolved through the image of peacock and peahen already discussed above. Her quest ends at her mother's house where she herself has found the true meaning of her life.

After discussing the important elements of the narrative structure, it is revealed that the story of the novel has been given in fragments, yet the novel manages to tell a fabulous story. The reading process is split into two between the narrative and the non-narrative passages. In the intervals, the narrator inserts pieces of totally different stories and anecdotes, which do not have a direct attachment to the main focus of the narrative. There is not a single flat sentence in the book. There are allusions to past with references to lots of real and imaginary figures. It would not be surprising to feel at a loss while reading the novel for the first time after all these seemingly non-relevant barrier-like sidetracks. Indeed, all these materials, which cross cut the narrative, are parts of a design in the carefully managed organization of the novel.

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