

**Women at the Crossroads in Indian Fiction: A Study of  
*The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman and  
Ancient Promises***

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BY

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## Declaration

I declare that the dissertation entitled “Women at the Crossroads in Indian Fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises” has been prepared by me under the guidance of Dr. Alpa Saini, Associate Professor, Department of Languages and Comparative Literature, School of Languages, Literature and Culture, Central University of Punjab.

No part of this dissertation has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellowship previously.

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## **Certificate**

I certify that Aiswarya John has prepared her dissertation entitled “Women at the Crossroads in Indian Fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises”, for the award of M.A. degree of the Central University of Punjab, under my guidance. She has carried out this work at the Department of Languages and Comparative Literature, School of Languages, Literature and Culture, Central University of Punjab.

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## **Abstract**

“Women at the Crossroads in Indian Fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises”

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This study entitled “Women at the Crossroads in Indian Fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises” examines the problems, predicaments and individual resistance of three generations of Indian women varied in time, space, caste-class sections and outlooks. These novels are specially chosen as their portrayal of women characters, in its own unique ways, reveals the crossroads of women in Indian fiction.

By: Aiswarya John

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The status of women in India is drastically changing over the time. There is a paradigmatic shift that undergoes in the life of Indian women which are reflected in the literature as well. One of the genres that wholeheartedly accommodated the transition is Indian fiction. After the advent of globalization and postmodern theories, Indian English writings extended its arena accommodating the global scenario without losing the indigenous qualities.

### 1.1 Feminism

Generally, Feminism is termed as a political and intellectual movement that claimed for the equal rights of women. Feminist criticism attained its organized form in 1960's even though the struggles began two centuries back. Feminist criticism is defined as "a special kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (Moi 204).

The French revolution and the United States revolution have flourished the thoughts of equality in multiple margins of life. The First wave of feminism covering nineteenth and early twentieth century come up with women's suffrage movement, claiming women's right to vote. Mary Wollstonecraft's first feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) scripts the early sociopolitical struggles of women. Mary Wollstonecraft is considered to be the grandmother of British feminism who advocated social equality and voting rights for women. First Women's Right Convention was held in Seneca in 1848, which was the first politically charged discussion on feminism. Also, under the leadership of Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton National Women's Suffrage Association was formed in 1869 later called as League of Women Voters. This league stands as the major fighting force for women's voting rights. Along with voting rights, they fought for making divorce laws flexible, acquiring respect for divorces and improved working

conditions for women. The first wave feminism lasted till 1920's focused on providing civil, intellectual, social and economic rights to women. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) stand as a groundbreaking work talks about the emancipation of women from patriarchal authority. The book deals with the issues of women's education, women's need for a space to grow, women centric writings and phallogentric language.

The period between 1920's and 1960's was a period of transition where the focus shifted to the social construction of gender rather than claiming of equal rights. The second wave of feminism lies between 1960's and 1990's, launched by Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). This wave fought against the sites of domination in women's body which denied the right to abortion, domestic violence and stereotyping of women under patriarchy. Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is regarded as the beginning of second wave feminism in the United States. Also, she is a founding figure of the organization called National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, which stood for ensuring reproductive rights and childcare rights to women. Moreover, Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* in 1983 and Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* in 1975 are works addressed the issues of sexual violence, prostitution, and rape. In 1970's a group of feminists called French feminists joined to differentiate the writings of women from men. They talked about female writing, body and female experience of writing through the body. French feminists like Elaine Showalter and Helene Cixous introduced female branches of writing. Showalter's *Gynocriticism* explores women writings and female experiences and Cixous' *Ecriture feminine* is about the feminine writings that will escape the restrictions imposed by Patriarchy.

The third wave feminism of mid 1990's dwelled up on creating a women centered theory rather than modifying the male centered theory. This feminism is poststructuralist feminism that tries to deconstruct the binary notions of gender. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of a popular poststructuralist and feminist philosopher Judith Butler who has contributed to the fields of feminism, gender and queer theory. Butler coined the term "gender performativity" in her revolutionary work

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity which has overthrown the presumptions governing gender. Moreover, the third wave feminism shifted its concerns from essentialist notions of femininity to incorporate various elements of gender, queer, postcolonial, eco feminism, postmodern and so on.

## **1.2 Feminism in India**

Feminist movements across the globe are a sociopolitical reality that has flourished over an epoch through different channels as an awakening against the oppression of women. Even though western influence contributed to the growth and development of feminism, the movement has taken the different shape in different countries based on its cultural premises and sociopolitical situations. Feminism in India is developed as a result of its indigenous struggles as well as of many imitations, assimilations, and resistance.

Moreover, the growth of feminism in India is a multi faceted trajectory rather than a linear progression. The tracing of developmental history Indian feminism is a tedious task as it comes up as the result of crisscross struggles in Indian society. The movement is set out in the context of subjugation of women by hierarchical and institutionalized structures of religion, caste, marriage and education. Radha Kumar in her work *The History of Doing* divides the history of women's rights and feminism in India into two as pre and post-independence periods. The pre-independence period ranges from 1850s to 1947 and post independence period is 1947. The colonial period in India has instigated better awareness of the conditions of women and need for change.

In contradiction to the western feminism, the first reformation movements in the lives of women are instigated by men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar which resulted in the abolition of Sati and removal of the legal obstacle to Hindu widow marriage. The major crust point of the reformation movements that organized at different levels started "right from the birth of a girl child, child marriage, age of consent, privileging of the Brahmin to Sati, widow remarriage and property rights" (Jain 81). By the end of the nineteenth century,

women joined the campaigns and by the beginning of the twentieth century, independent women's organizations were formed. The reformations have its outburst from Bengal and Maharashtra.

The major women activists of the Pre independence India are Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), Tarabhai Shinde (1850-1910), Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Ramabai Ranade (1863 – 1924), Anandilal Joshi, Swarnkumari Debi (1856-1932), Madame Bhikaiji Rustomji Cama (1861-1936), Saraladevi Chaudhurani (1872-1945), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880- 1932) and Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887-1925). Sarabai Phule is among the first known women social reformers who founded the first school for girls in 1848 at Pune and become first women teacher in India. This institution becomes the inspiration for many girls to get educated and come to the forefront of the society imbued in religious taboos and caste discriminations. Later in 1882, Tarabai Shinde published a groundbreaking booklet named *Stree Purusha Tulana* considered to be the first Indian modern feminist work which has shaken the grounds of Indian upper caste patriarchy and aroused debates in the different sections of Indian society. This work stands as a critique of the patriarchal pedigree of Hindu religious scriptures. But, "Shinde's defense of women was impassioned, she concluded with an exhortation to women, that they should, by the strength, of their firm will, remain always well behaved, pure as fire, and unblemished internally and externally, and shame men into hanging down their heads" (Kumar 32).

Similarly, the modern reformed religious organization like Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj included women preachers in Bengal and Punjab. Also, the independence revolutions and congress sessions enabled the participation of women in public domain. There was a large number of women's participation in rural and urban political satyagrahas'. Under the leadership of Pandita Ramabai, Anandilal Joshi, and Ramabhai Ranade, women joined hands with an independent will to participate in the struggles of nation and predicament of women. Pandita Ramabai founded Mahila Arya Samaj with the aim of emancipation and education of women and Sharada Ashram for rehabilitation of widows. She published *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in 1887, a critique of patriarchal Brahmin society in Maharashtra.

Anandhibai Joshi is Ramabhai's cousin, who took steps for the education of Hindu widows. Other notable feminist thinkers of pre-independence period are Kamini Roy, one among the leaders of women's suffrage movement in 1921; Saraladevi Chaudhurani who founded Bharat Stree Mahamandir as well as organized campaign for protecting women from molesting British soldiers and Saroj Nalini Dutt who contributed a lot to the women's education in Bengal.

Subsequently, the emancipation of women attained new heights during Indian national movements under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. His speeches created awareness in people against the customs of child marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage. Dalit women feminism awakened as a part of anti-caste and anti untouchable agitations in 1920's. The participation women in the movements lead to the great step of formation of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. "AIWC has been instrumental in bringing about some reforms like the Hardhat Act (1929) banning child marriage, the dissolution of the Muslim Marriage Act (1939) and the bill for the better supervision of orphanages, rescue homes and marriage bureaus of (1940)" (Purushottam 14).

The post-independence period of Indian feminism looked upon the sexual demarcations of men and women in the various field of labor, domestic life, education, traditional customs and practices. Also, it is noted that many feminists in the post independence period have tried to overthrow the presumption justifying the sexual divide between men and women to an extent. The feminism of the post-independence period is fragmented between individuals, organizations and different agencies due to political situations of partition in Independent India. Later, India viewed Telangana women's battalion, anti-patriarchal sentiments of women in Shahada movement of Uttarakhand, anti-alcohol agitations in Himachal and women's liberation groups. Despite of this, the postmodern feminism in India focused on ensuring the active participation and equality for women in all areas of life. Moreover, it addresses the issues of domestic violence, rape, molestation, education, dowry, birth control, female infanticide and issues of working women. The feminist thinkers of the period are Jasodara Bagchi, Megna Pant, Devaki Jain, Padma Gole, Uma

Narayanan, Gita Sahgal and Vandhana Siva. In *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*, Uma Narayanan questions the notion of Indian feminism as the slavish imitation of the western feminism. She rightly states, “Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of ‘western agendas’ in one clear and simple sense—— Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women.” (Weedon’ 13)

The reflections of the plight of the women in India society can be seen in the contemporary fictions. Indian fiction from 1970’s has taken women’s issues with great seriousness. The writers like such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Gauri Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das and Meena Kandaswamy have dealt the struggles faced by Indian women through their works.

Along with these, K.R Meera, Githa Hariharan, and Jaishree Misra are among the notable figures in Indian fiction which have the nuances of Indian women’s life. K.R Meera, the noted Malayalam fiction writer and the author of *Aarachar*, translated to English as *Hangwoman* is born on 19 February 1970 in Sastham Kota of Kerala. She is a multi award winning writer and journalist, who has published essays, short stories and novels. Meera’s most hailed work *Aarachar* published in 2012 awarded her the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award and the novel has been short listed for DSC prize for South Asian Literature 2016. The translation of *Aarachar* from Malayalam to English is done by J. Devika, a bilingual feminist scholar. Her novel, *Aarachar* (*Hangwoman*) is about 22 year old Chetna Grddha Mullick, the protagonist of the novel who becomes the first woman executioner in India. The novel is set in the backdrop of old Bengal with its smells, sounds and pulse; situating itself in Kalighat and Sonagachi. The novel is a complex and detailed saga of a woman who breaks free from the clutches of her controlling father, overcomes the manipulation of a man she both desires and detests, and comes into her own.

Githa Hariharan, Indian novelist and editor, born in Coimbatore (1954) and educated in Bombay and United States. She published her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* in 1992, which has won Common Wealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in 1993. Her published writings include the short story collection *The Art of Dying* the essay collection *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places* and the novels *The Winning Team*, *In Times of Siege*, *When Dreams Travel*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *Fugitive Histories*. Her introductory novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* deals with the struggle of Devi, the young woman protagonist, to cope and survive in the prison-house of an arranged marriage. The novel interweaves women's life with mythologies. The character Devi gets back from US to Madras after her completing her studies and denying her boyfriend Dan. After her returns back, she has caught into an unhappy married life. Later, she elopes with Gopal, a Hindustani classical singer. The life with Gopal has not turned as she expected and she returns to her own house to live with her mother.

Jaishree Misra, Indian writer and journalist, born in New Delhi (1961) and moved to United Kingdom in 1993. She has worked in the fields of Special Needs in India, Department of Social Services in Buckinghamshire and Broadcast journalist with BBC. Her introductory novel *Ancient Promises* published in 2000 established her space in literary circle. Her major works include a comedy of manners called *Accidents like Love and Marriage*, Novels like *Afterwards*, *Rani*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Secrets and Sins*, *A Scandalous Secret*, *A Love Story by Mr. Misra*, *A House for Mr. Misra* and *A Love Story for My Sister*. The novel *Ancient Promises* introduces Janu as a sixteen year old Nair girl, born and brought up in Delhi belongs to a family rooted in Kerala. Janu has fallen in love with a school cricketering hero, Arjun and runs the love affair in the midst of lots of fear and restrictions. Arjun sets out to England for his higher education, promising a life ahead together. Later, Janu is married to Suresh of Maraar's family and they have an incompatible relationship. Later, she meets Arjun and starts a new life with him.

The present study entitled “Women at Crossroads in Indian fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises” aims to look at the depiction of women in contemporary Indian English fiction and the changes it undergo, focusing on the feministic perspective of the selected novels. Also, it explores the predicament of Indian women placed between the contradictory notions of tradition, modernity and individuality based on the three generations of women depicted in the novels. Moreover, the analysis of representation of women’s role in myths, lores and customs as well as the enduring oppression, self-realization and identity of female characters with special reference to the protagonists are made under the study.

The study primarily deals with three core chapters that will explore the cross roads of women in Indian fiction. The first core chapter titled “Crossroads of Tradition, Modernity and Individuality” attempts to analyse the predicament of Indian women placed between the contradictory notions of tradition, modernity and individuality based on the three novels. Also, examines how the responses of three generations of women vary in conformity to the above aspects. The second core chapter titled “Crossroads of Myths, Lores and Customs” look at the portrayal of women in the respective cultures. Also, the chapter analyses the predicament of women based on mythology, lores and customs. In addition, the third core chapter titled “Crossroads of enduring oppression, self-realization and identity” compares and contrasts enduring oppression, self-realization and identity of the female characters.

For achieving the objectives of the study, the methodology of feminist criticism is employed in the study along with myth criticism and cultural criticism. The portrayal of women characters in the three novels women’s are entangled with tradition, myths, modernity, institutional structures and cultural practices, as depicted in the novels. Since the needs and issues of women in India are dissimilar with that of west, much attention is given to Indian feminist criticisms rather than Western feminist criticism.

Also, the comparative and analytical method is used for the better understanding of the texts that presents varied responses of three generations of women characters. In addition, myth criticism will dwell on the underlying myths in the selected novels.

The feminist analysis of women characters in Indian fiction is a promising field that needs further exploration although certain studies are conducted in the field. Mala Renganathan's article titled "Indian Woman at the Cross Roads: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Heroines" explores how feminism in India is different from that of western feminism, with reference to Shashi Deshpande's novels titled *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. The author opines that "the problems and predicaments peculiar to the Indian women found artistic expression in the Indian literature in English since the 1970s" (Renganathan 72). Renganathan argues that feminism in Indian texts should be analyzed in its own scale rather than comparing it with western feminism. For this, she attempts to critically examine the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's three novels. She finds that Deshpande objectifies the new female experiences. By examining the novels, Renganathan categorizes suffering women characters to three types as traditional women characters, women characters in suffer in converse with tradition who are self reliant and women in between the two. The article presents the humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism which points to the increasing participation of women in her predicament as expressed in the three novels.

Hari M G in "Negotiation of Identity in K. R Meera's *Hangwoman*" search for the negotiation of identity with the aid of Foucault's thoughts on power, subjectivity, and critique. The article suggests that the power depicted in the novel moulds and remolds the 'identities' of the characters. Also, attempts are made to underpin the resistance set forth by Chetna in private space with Foucault's negotiations of power. Chetna is portrayed as a marginalized woman having strangled through the assertion of power, which later leads to her daring resistance. The study concludes that Chetna's "subjectivity becomes an act of bringing forth new dimensions of existence as opposed to a mere rebellion against the existing power structures" (249).

In addition, the article “Evoking the Female Prowess: A Journey towards Self-realization in K. R. Meera’s Aarachar” written by Vidya Vijayan analyses Hangwoman Chetna’s role as an attempt to overcome the nullification of female identity in the midst of patriarchal norms. The protagonist in her rage surpasses the oppression through conventional orthodoxy and move towards self-realization. Her performance towards the end of the story appears to shatter the phallogocentric order and overpower the masculine identities. The article also points to the awakening of women writer’s after 1960’s. Moreover, the novel Aarachar itself stands as “an exhortation to the subordinated and subjugated female to come out of her shackles to become a self-assertive and self-reliant woman” (483).

The research paper titled “A Feministic Approach to Hangwoman By K R Meera” written by Malavika Thayat and Shilpa S. Nair, discusses the title ‘Hangwoman’ itself as fascinating to feminist circles. The article presents the protagonist Chetna as a “symbol of sheer power in the male dominated society.” The novel is found to be an attack on the Hippocratic notions on women put forward by the Indian society. Also, the novel interweaves itself with history, myth and realism encompassed with a woman’s search for identity. The close analysis of the male and female characters asserts the struggles faced by women in Patriarchy. The study concludes by pointing out Chetna as a powerful woman through whom Meera is hanging the male chauvinism in Indian society.

In another article, “A writer is inherently a feminist, humanist, environmentalist and a socialist” published by The Telegraph India dated 18 January 2015 reports an interview with K. R Meera done by Varuna Varma, which discusses about Meera’s views about the book. The article traces how Meera founds the setting of the novel. Meera got the spark in 2004 from the hanging of Dhananjay Chatterjee who raped and murdered a girl by Hangman Nata Mullick in Calcutta’s Alipore jail. Much of the article deals with Meera’s personal life and the back grounding is done for the novel. Moreover, the article presents the story of Hangwoman as death of Chetana’s innocence.

The article “Feminist Elements in The Thousand Faces of Night” explores the feministic reading of Githa Hariharan depicted through her eminent novel The Thousand Faces of Night. The author opines that Hariharan tries to show “how Indian women can be liberated from the shackles of outmoded and debilitating tradition of dark ages against which the women are suppressed to accept crushing and superstitious traditions” (8). The discussion encompasses feminist and sociological approach of Githa Hariharan, along with the analysis of myths, tradition, Rebel, patriarchy, and discourse transmitted by the characters. Also, attempts are made to show the identity crisis of the women characters with special reference to the character Devi, in the struggle between tradition and modernity. Whereas, the sociological approach in the article studies women as a part of the feminist system, their motherhood and the widening gender gap. In short, the article discusses the subordination of women in patriarchal system fostered as well as challenged by myths and dialogues in The Thousand Faces of Night.

Another article titled “The Thousand Faces of Night: Indian Trends of Feminism” closely analyses how the Indian myths, customs and traditions become a subtle witness of women’s suffrage as portrayed in The Thousand Faces of Night. The author presents the suppression of women characters encircled with mythologies, marginalized spaces and tradition. The article asserts the female subjects quest for own spaces. Also, questions the restrictions in the name of customs and traditions, which is not the true picture of Indian culture. The author shares the irony of forced marriages in Indian society that once propagated Swayamwaras. Thus, the close study of the novel through the Indian lens of feminism, the author reveals the struggles faced by women in Indian society.

In the article “Patriarchy and Feministic views in Jaishree Misra’s Ancient Promises” written by G. Venkatalakshmi and Dr. J. Uma Samundeeswari, views the novel through the lens of radical feminism. Firstly, the article points to the gender bias against women existing India and the privileges men asserts through patriarchal Indian traditions such as marriage. Also, the article let know the Indian writers efforts to abolish patriarchy. Some of the noted Indian novelists who presents women’s

existence in society are The list of Indian women novelists comprises Anita Desai, Shobha De, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Gauri Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das and so on. The article traces patriarchy and feminism through the close analysis of the plot and characters of Ancient Promises. The protagonist, Janu is depicted as one who suffers of love, institutional marriage and cultural variation. Also, the research sheds light in to how patriarchy conditions women.

Richa Pandey and Aprajita Sharma in the article titled “Struggling Women for their Own Identity In Jaishree Misra’s Ancient Promises and Anita Desai’s Clear Light of the Day” comes up with women protagonists search for identity in midst of struggles, oppression and suppression caused by patriarchy. Both the novels Ancient Promises and Clear the Light of the Day represent women’s agony in the conflict between tradition and modernity. The study establishes that the two characters Janu and Bimla have become embodiments of revolt in search for their individual space in education, financial independence and self fulfillment. Also, the emphasis is given to women’s existence as more than married sexual objects.

The articles and studies aver that the predicament of Indian woman is different from Western woman that has to deal with special attention. These articles show that there are studies conducted on feminism, tradition and modernity and myths in The Thousand Faces of Night. In addition, these articles deal with the feminist approach to the protagonists of Ancient Promises and Hangwoman.

While looking at the studies on these books and similar studies on Indian fiction, it is evident that there is a need to further exploration to fill the gaps. The previous studies have never explored the concepts of tradition, modernity and individuality with respect to three generation of women characters. Also, most of the previous literature deals with only the female protagonists of the three novels separately. In addition, this study tries to explore the women characters caught between tradition, modernity and individuality; there enduring oppression, self-realization and identity, as well as the portrayal of women characters in myths, lores and customs, at a stretch. This multi faceted study accommodating the nuances of

cultural difference within India tries to explore the plight of the different generation of women characters in Indian fiction.

This study entitled “Women at Crossroads in Indian fiction: A Study of *Hangwoman*, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *Ancient Promises* examines the women characters in novel through the lens of feminism, focusing on Indian feminist criticism as women’s struggle for liberation in Indian society is dissimilar to the west. These novels are specially chosen as their portrayal of women characters, in its own unique ways, reveals the crossroads of women in Indian fiction. ‘Crossroads’ simply means an intersecting of two or more roads. Whereas, Cambridge English Dictionary defines the idiomatic expression “be at a crossroads” means “to be at a stage in your life when you have to make a very important decision” which is also understood through the synonyms like ‘break through’, ‘turning point’ or ‘boiling point’. (“Crossroads”)

The women writers of these novels present three generations of women and their conflict in the patriarchal Indian society. The attempt is made to study the women characters at the crossroads of tradition, modernity and individuality; mythology and tales; institutional structures and cultural practices, which in effect leads to enduring oppression, self-realization and identity.

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## Chapter 2

### Crossroads of Tradition, Modernity and Individuality

Indian fiction is always sensitive to the nuances of women's lives and the changes it has undergone over the centuries. The life of women caught in the oppressive male dominated society is always represented in the novels, along with the struggles and oppression. The novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Hangwoman*, and *Ancient Promises* portrays three generations of women characters within it, who are caught between the opposing notions of tradition, modernity and individuality.

#### 2. 1 Crossroads in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

*The Thousand Faces of Night* written by Githa Hariharan is a debut novel which revolves around the protagonist Devi and three generations of women characters including Devi, Sita, Mayamma, Parvatiyamma, and grandmother. The protagonist of the novel, Devi struggles hardy between tradition and modernity along with the struggle for her individuality.

The novel begins with Devi's get back from the US to Madras after her completing her studies and denying her boyfriend Dan's marriage proposal owing to her ambivalence to American life. Thus, she comes back and has caught into an arranged marriage with Mahesh, for satisfying the will of her widow mother Sita. The marriage life with Mahesh who works as a regional manager in a multinational company is not soothing as he does not value the individuality and desires of Devi. She cannot tolerate being a traditional wife figure like her mother Sita, who sacrificed her Veena for becoming ideal Daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. Also, like Mayamma, the household retainer in Mahesh's family. She is immensely influenced by subverted mythological stories of Gandhari, Amba, and Ganga told by her grandmother and Parvatiamma's rejected role of a householder. Devi's inability to conceive the child and Mahesh's discouragement against her job worsens the situation. As a result, Devi walks out of Mahesh's house and elopes with Gopal, a

Hindustani classical singer. The life with Gopal has not turned as she expected and she returns to her own house to live with her mother.

The women characters in the novel struggle hardly between tradition and modernity without apt support to her individuality. As Dr. Padmini and S.K. Sudha assert:

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. (126)

The novel presents three generations of women characters varied in their caste-class sections, outlooks, emotional responses and psychological developments. Also, it explores the treatment of Indian wife in different generations. Grandmother and Mayamma belong to the first generation, Sita, Parvathamma, and Gauri belong to the second generation and, Devi and Uma belongs to the third generation of women. The novelist addresses the issues of women rooted in Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the contemporary world. The myths chosen by Hariharan are the marginalized stories of women that are suppressed in the mainstream. Grandmother's stories are about Damayanti, Ganga, Gandhari, Amba, and girl who married snake rather than glorified Sita or Savitri. And this shows how certain stories in Indian tradition are rewarded and others are submerged. Grandmother presents stories as answers to day to day life issues of women.

Devi, Sita and Grandmother belong to a Tamil Brahmin family entwined closely to the Tamil Brahmin culture where Tradition spreads over every birth of life. The life and fate of the women are determined by horoscope, marriage and in service of the husband more willingly than women's education, independence and individuality. Moreover, mythical characters of gods and goddesses intermingle in life like the members of a family.

The changing notions of marriage can be seen as it has been far from Swayamvara that allowed "bride's choice, the regal dignity and solemnity" (Hariharan 18) as depicted in the epics and close to purchasing a bride even though society once

removed from tradition pretence that “they were not shopping for a wife” (Hariharan 23).

Hariharan presents that women caught between tradition and modern ways are preferable to the third generation of men. During the occasion of marriage proposal Devi elaborates on the preference of bridegroom as “they were looking for an accomplished bride, a young woman who would talk intelligently to her scientist husband’s friends, but who would also be, as all the matrimonial ads in the Sunday papers demanded, fair, beautiful, home loving, and prepared to ‘adjust’” (Hariharan 17). This in itself points to the conflicts that can be aroused while undermining the individuality under the contradictory notions of tradition and modernity.

Devi’s grandmother is a wise lady, illiterate and widowed woman who find answers to the problems of life in myths by subverting it according to her own gauge of life. Through the stories of Damayanti, Amba, Gandhari, Ganga and the girl who married the snake she teaches Devi the results of desire, marriage, sacrifice, motherhood and wifely virtues correspondingly. Moreover, the parallels are drawn between mythical women and the characters like Amba with Uma, Ganga with Devi, Gandhari with Sita and Damayanti and girl who married snake with Gauri. The revision of the stories direct to the social constructive nature of traditions and myths. The traditions of her time consider chastity, piety and submissiveness as the virtues of womanhood that one should follow on their roles as daughter, wife and mother. The women’s existence is always in relation to that of men.

The traditional houses called Agraharam’s are greatly associated with Brahmin cultures of South India which are the settlements of high-class people on the sides of the path to temples. Grandmother’s Agraharam is in a dilapidated state on the childhood of Devi that indicates the fading of traditions, rituals and cultural practices. The practices like removing ghosts using water mixed with turmeric, putting ‘kolam’ in front of houses, offering flowers to goddesses, garlanding trees in marriage and denying women to enter temples as well as in conducting rituals on the occasion of their menstruation can be traced in the novel. A strict adherence to the marriage and motherhood is the norm during these times. “A girl is given only once in marriage” (33) “if Gods are angry, they make sure you don’t have a child” (33). Grandmothers

disinterestedness towards modern ways is evident when she called blouse as “a modern nonsense” and clinging herself to the traditional nine-yard sari.

Grandmother’s question “Can a daughter raised as a daughter become a man?” (39) sounds similar to Judith Butler’s definition of gender as "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 33).

Mayamma is a distinctive second generation illiterate woman and housekeeper in Devi’s in laws family. She is a woman, who performed her roles of being daughter, wife and mother, and tortured by husband, son and mother. She was married at the age of twelve to ‘a man like animal’ many years elder than her. He suffered under her husband, mother in law and later under her son. She is a symbol of suffering and endurance of women in Indian society marginalised by class and caste. Marriage as a license to rape can be seen in the life of Mayamma. She never questions the patriarchal order neither makes a choice of her own. She is submissive, humble and passive woman surrender to the patriarchal dominance in the notions of marriage, family and motherhood. Mayamma represents the generation of women caught under the spell of tradition and patriarchal aggression. Similarly, the prevailing of patriarchy and domestic violence can be traced in the lives of Uma and Gauri as well.

The brunt of brutality inflicted by men and women in patriarchy is clear she recalls the torture of husband and mother in law:

She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my barrenness. I burned, my thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails (Hariharan 113).

Furthermore, her inability to conceive during the early stages of marriage was portrayed as result of sin. For that, she goes behind many traditional customs and practices to please the gods. What she believes to be the ‘product’ of these prayers, his son beat her for not providing what he demands. The life story of Mayamma is of

an ordinary woman without supernatural powers. Even after, the continuing torture and deserted husband, she looks after her son and mother in law as if it is the duty of her. Sudhir Kakar explanation fits into the life of Mayamma. He avers:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identify that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is son, is both a certification and redemption. (Kakar 59)

Sita, the second generation woman and mother of Devi is not moved by the life of the gods and tradition. She wears saree even in midst of sweating sun. When Devi looks at her she seems to be “a strong, self willed woman” (16) but, her submissiveness in the domestic life is unknown to Devi. Later it is known that Sita stopped playing Veena after her marriage to pay attention to house hold duties, the cautious warning of father-in-law. After that, she bestowed her talent and individuality to turn herself into “a wife, a daughter in law” (30). Thus, Sita become a ‘Gandhari’ of the era. This points that, “In any society women are the chief preservers of tradition and in a sense no change howsoever momentous becomes complete or real unless it involves them and carries them along.” (Naresh 9)

Sita has undergone all the faces of womanhood being a daughter, wife, mother and widow on relation with man. She was a ‘good’ wife of Mahadevan, who was loyal to her as well. Moreover, she is an embodiment of power who subverted the roles and become a matriarch of the house. The strong willed Sita is evident on the Mahadevan’s death in South Africa where she burns the bundle of papers on which he lied dead and the body in “a modern, sanitized crematorium” (106). Aftermath, her whole life is dedicated to her daughter Devi and sends her to US against the oppositions from people. Sita expect that Devi as “she is different, she is special, but she is just as pliant as your home-grown daughters” (15). Throughout Sita’s life, she hated illusion and she focused on doing things for Mahadevan and Devi, she ruled with an iron hand. Although, she feels distressed by Devi’s action to quit Mahesh and

elope with Gopal. The action of playing Veena in the end of the novel is a symbol of liberation and return to her individuality. Instead of dwelling on past, she becomes a free woman devoid of the roles assigned.

Devoid of all problems in life Mayamma moves to Parvatiamma's house and serve the household. Another second-generation woman, Parvatiamma is the mother of Mahesh and in-law of Devi who leaves the home and goes in search of salvation like Gautama Buddha. It is said that "Parvatiamma had been more ambitious. She had, like a man self-absorbed search for a god, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder." (Hariharan 64) This makes it questionable whether she is behind God or behind her own self and individuality.

Devi is the representative of the third generation women, born and brought up in Traditional Brahmin society and educated in the US. Through her life in the US, she is acquainted with the ways of individual freedom where choice much depends on the person rather than family. The conflict between the tradition and modernity in the life of Devi is much visible after she gets back from US rejecting Dan, her boyfriend. The multiple existence of Devi is revealed after she was thrown into an arranged marriage rather than 'swayamvara', to the hands of "a polite stranger" (49) called Mahesh. The overriding discoloured tradition is revealed through the setting of Mahesh's house where Devi begins her life as "dusty rooms and cockroach-ridden cupboards, "cobwebs and a fine layer of black crumbs, like dregs from the past; and familiar, musty smell of something stale and forgotten." (59) The confusions in the marriage are exposed through the inner thoughts of Devi that "Who was this man, this husband whose arms I was to lie in every night? (49). At the same time, she is conditioned with the traditional life during her childhood and modern life during her higher studies. The problem with tradition and individuality is obscure when she says, "stories of womanhood I would soon grow into, without insinuating myself on to that fantastic canvas" (40). Devi cannot mould herself to Baba's expectations that "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" (71). She is lost between

the modern and traditional outlooks to life. This creates the dilemma that makes her at the crossroads, through which she surface out with her individuality.

Devi's conditioning with myths is evident when she says, "I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads. (41) Contradictorily, she suffers hardly due to the sphere of modern outlook, "My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood" (54). Mahesh's complain about Devi provides the clash between tradition and modernity as well as it opens up the patriarchal notion on women's education. "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want?" (74) Her modern and mythical knowledge make her into a multiple existence.

In addition, the hollowness of blind imitation of tradition is revealed through the ironical statement that thank god for Indians not being obsessed with love in marriage (55). Women lives are depicted as merely for the welfare of men. For establishing this, patriarchal norms teach women that "by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens" (55). Devi's rejection of motherhood is the symbol of rage against the patriarchal norms of the society. Her relationships with men do not appear soothing as what she values in life is love and freedom. Dan wants an American way of life far from Devi's culture, Mahesh looks down on women as they are irrational, and cannot deal with the affairs of the world and Gopal is a despot dwelling on his own world. Consequently, she appears to take the control of life by her own and comes out of the life with Dan, husband, and Gopal as she cannot cop up with it. By the end of the novel, Devi is no longer a passive woman, an upholder of traditional values and norms, but a strong woman with an independent will.

The individuality of the characters is the factor that makes difference within and across the generations. Mayamma and Uma become the victims of hierarchy of patriarchal power. Whereas, Grandmother and Sita tries to make diversions within their own life's unlike Devi. In contradiction to this, Devi tries to break the stereotype and rise above the norms of tradition.

## 2.2 Crossroads in *Hangwoman*

K. R. Meera's hailed book, *Aarachar* (*Hangwoman*) presents the story of a woman executioner, which alien to the typical Indian notions of womanhood. The novel portrays three generations of women characters including Thakuma, Ma, Kaki ma, Trilokya Debi, Niharika and Chetna. Moreover, these characters expose the different faces of tradition, modernity, individuality and its combinations.

The novel is about 22 year old Chetna Grddha Mullick, the protagonist of the novel who becomes the first woman executioner in India. The novel is set in the backdrop of old Bengal with its smells, sounds and pulse; situating itself in Kalighat and Sonagachi. *Hangwoman* narrates the life of Chetna and her families professional lineage that is traced back to forth century BC. The family of Grddha Mullick, consists of her father Phanibhushan Grrdha Mullick; Ramu da, the crippled and armless brother; Thakuma, the grandmother; Ma, Kakima and Kaku. Chetna is appointed as the first woman executioner in India, assistant and successor to her father, Phanibhushan Mullick, who is of eighty-eight years of old and have executed four hundred and fifty one condemned men. And she is being part of the media sensations and commits a contract with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, representative of CNC Channel. By this, she has submitted all rights of transmitting and publishing interviews related to the awaiting execution to the channel, until the date of Jatindranath Banerjee's execution. Her life explodes between her desires, family Lineage and the execution. Even though, she is hanging herself in the beginning, slowly disentangle her and proves her ability to execute the perpetrator. The novel interweaves itself with myths and legendary stories to depict the social and professional existence of women over the time. Chetna is one among the powerful woman characters in Indian literature, which shows the awakening of a female self and questions the clutches of patriarchy.

As, the caste divisions in India, the community who perform the duty of a hangman is considered to be in lower caste and status of the society. Rober Vane Russel in *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* states that the community historically associated with low-status perform ritually impure professions such as rope making, village musicians, cattle castration, leather curing, midwifery, hangmen, and undertaking" (Russel 188). Even though, the novel

develops through the poor economic conditions, it presents the legacy of the tradition of executioners.

The grandmother of Chetna, Bhuvaneswari Devi is more than hundred years of age called as Thakuma is the mouthpiece of tradition. She presents the myths and history of Kolkata and their family lineage to Chetna. She is a proud and strong woman who ties everything with tradition and norms of the society. Her tales starts from the first executioner of their ancestry Radharaman Mullick and longs to endless executions and executioners. This shows the women's passive indulgence in the tradition of Grrdha Mullicks, except one female executioner in the whole lineage named Pingalakeshini. Also, Thakuma is the one who supports Chetna when everyone is against her will to perform the execution. Moreover, she is an ardent supporter of his elder son and always remind everyone that they are "the members of a family older than even the king, we [they] are but instruments of power" (54). In short she is a traditional iron lady.

Also, Thakuma's approach towards modernism is not at all promoting. She opposes everything that defies the tradition. Her complaint about the sari is a minor incident that shows her combat against modernity. Devi says "I remembered all of Thakuma's complaints about the sari; her grandmother had apparently cursed Keshab Chandra Sen till the end of her life for having popularized such a tight-fitting, stifling garment in the name of the Bengal Renaissance. How comfortable the old style was, she grumbled- just wrap one end around the waist, throw the other over the shoulder!" (180). And she resists the marriage proposal between Chetna and Sanjeev Kumar Mitra as he does not have an executioners tradition. She says it is "Better to sell your body than marry a man who lacks that..." (209). Besides this, she shouts at other women like Ma and Kakima not for obeying their men and not being worthy of their lineage. She is proud about the ways through which their ancestors have done the execution and even about the rope and time taken in it. One among their ancestors is Mosh Grrdha Mullick and the people believed that it was a great honor to die with the hands of him. Raja of Gwalior honoured him with a hundreds of bag full of gold coins. One among that is preserved by Thakuma as a symbol of their tradition.

In Contradiction, the generation woman Sachinamayi Devi called as “Ma” by Chetna is the mother of her. She is a woman bound to traditions and a suffering figure in the novel. The ‘sindoor’ strewn liberally in her forehead not only demonstrates her status as married but also the suffering she had faced through the institution of marriage. Chetna narrates the story of her mother’s impregnation, out of which Chetna is born. “he [Baba] grabbed Ma while she was buying vegetables in the market and tried to fuck her in public view” (3). Baba always used to abuse and torment her. Even though, she is a sufferer in the marriage institution she wants Chetna to get married as soon as possible. She avers “For the woman like us, marriage is an escape route. It was, for me. A place to sleep...some food, at least once a day...” (251). The situation is explained as, “Willingly or unwillingly, the Hindu woman passes on the legacy of the patriarchal system to her daughter who may either accept it implicitly or may question it but may finally accede to it” (Uma 68). Also, she opposes the idea of Chetna’s job as hang woman. She wishes that Chetna should live a life of a dignified woman as she is an educated woman. She is a woman caught between tradition and modernity.

Whereas, Kaki ma, the devoted wife who lives in poverty, along with the physically unfit husband. She goes to Sonagachi, to earn money and treat her husband. This makes her under the rage of Phanibhushan Grrdha Mullick’s and he kills Kakima and her husband. She is the victim of the family’s tradition and patriarchal authority.

Similarly, Trilokya Debi belongs to the second generation is the mother of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra the cunning lover of Chetna. Her son reveals nothing about his mother and tells everybody that she is dead. She lives as a prostitute in Sonagachi. She can be seen as sexually deviant one rather than a sexually fallen. Chetna feels fascinated by her individuality. She is an Agrevali that believed to be descended from Apsaras. For the Agrevelis, “Prostitution is a matter of pride” (348). She is woman asserts her individuality and not feared of her identity as a prostitute. She is proud of her ways of living. It is said that “Instead of possessing the self hatred and inferiority of women who rent out their bodies to men, she was as energetic and joyful as a girl

of sixteen who was constantly courted and constantly in love” (361). She is a woman interested in modern luxuries and exploring on a liveable independent existence. In contrast, Niharika, the sister of Chetna is married against the will of her providing dowry and later she committed suicide as a result of the domestic violence she has undergone. She is a victim of patriarchal customs and traditions.

The patriarchal domination in the novel is revealed through the characters of Phanibushan Grrdha Mullick, Sajeev Kumar Mitra, IG Srinath Mullick and through the norms of the society, which subjugated women. Baba is a man of dramatic words. The irony in his words is obvious when he pronounced, “She is my daughter, she too has the courage which runs in my blood and of my forefathers, and Ma Kali’s blessing as well...She needs to come as a formality, that’s all” (21). Moreover, they provide the opportunity to Chetna as Ramu da is crippled and physically unfit. They define women’s existence as only objects of pleasure and one that ease their life. Baba’s claim stresses this. “No matter whether she is—inside Sonagachi or inside the house—a woman serves the same purpose.”(93). Also, they demands worship and honor from women. Those who deviate or question their authority are harassed mentally and emotionally.

Moreover, Chetna, the protagonist is a third generation woman who comes out of the veils of patriarchy. She is an educated woman who pursued up to pre-degree. She is connected with Tradition and modernity. “It’s the first time in the whole world that a woman is been appointed as an executioner, She is a symbol of strength and self respect to the whole world now...” (71).Her link with tradition of her family is stated as, “...from the time I was in my mother’s womb, I was already tied up in the umbilical cord. My mother’s belly had to be cut open so I could be taken out. Thakuma bragged that “the noose I’d tied even as a fetus was a faultless one” (3). In addition, she had made a noose and suffocated the man, Maruti Prasad who tried to molest her. This is an occasion of identifying her individuality. After this, she states “I was afraid to look at my own hands. I had not realized that my hands were so strong, so rough” (9). She was a strong woman, even not understood by her Ma. Her father announces her to be the hangwoman, only as a shadow and for earning money. He

thinks that he will do while she act as a doll in the foreground. And, Sanjeev Kumar Mitra of CNC channel makes a contract for covering her whole deeds till the date of execution. He tries to sexually harass her on the first day he visits her home. Later, he comes up with the marriage proposal to which Mullick responds positively. In the beginning, Chetna exhibits desire and disappointment in the relationship.

After a while, Chetna comes out of the patriarchal veil and stood for herself. She comes out of the home after Ramu da's death against the customs and went for the job at Manu da's as a proof-reader. After that, she denies Sanjeev and takes up the job her own. As Baba is jailed for killing Kaku and Kakima, the resistance from the family reduces. Several women's organizations come up to confirm her job as hangwoman as the patriarchal society cannot admit a hangwoman. She surpasses the entire crisis and becomes the first female executioner of India.

Chetna's tie with tradition can be seen in her response to Annapoorna's story. Annapoorna was a woman who followed Buddha by abandoning her husband and children. And the people stoned her. On hearing this, Chetna feels that she was the woman who had declared two thousand years ago, her heart is fixed on bliss (270).

The patriarchal society has omitted women from the history. Chetna provides the reason for conflict between history and men. She wants to imprint herself on history as a rebellion against centuries of oppression. She claims, "It is not women who fear history; it is history that fears women. That's why there are so few of them in it. My place in it was assured only if I managed to put the noose around Jatindranath Banerjee's neck and died in a flawlessly executed hanging" (189).

Moreover, the intervention of modern society can be seen in the form of education, media and women organizations. Being a lower caste woman she is marginalized in many ways of class, caste and gender. The agreement with Sanjeev Kumar about the media coverage is a kind of commoditization. Also, the female members of the women's organization are unaware of the problems and predicaments peculiar to lower class women and they are not concerned about the individuality of Chetna. She emerges out of the suppressions because of her

individuality. It is said that “there is no use putting any pressure on me if it is something I can’t do. Isn’t that so? Do not expect such kind of answer from an uneducated hangman’s daughter (24). By claiming tradition and asserting herself, she hanged the male chauvinism underlying in traditional and modern society. Thus, she writes her own history.

### **2.3 Crossroads in *Ancient Promises***

Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises* is a touching story of Janu’s love, marriage, divorce and motherhood, caught between two extremes of tradition and modernity. The novel presents three generations of women and their varied responses to life.

The novel introduces Janu as a sixteen year old Nair girl, born and brought up in Delhi belongs to a family rooted in Kerala. Janu has fallen in love with a school cricketer hero, Arjun and runs the love affair in the midst of lots of fear and restrictions. Her family came to know about the affair and restricts her to the house. Arjun sets out to England for his higher education, promising a life ahead together. After this, Janu is taken to Kerala, for a usual family visit to Kerala. The romance with Arjun meets an end due to the circumstances and she gets married according to the will of her parents to Suresh, a member of great Maraar’s family. The life of Janu is miserable there without love and compassion. She gives birth to a baby girl hoping that everything will turn right by this. On the contrary, situations get worsened as the child Riya is mentally challenged. Against much opposition from Suresh’s family, Janu continues with her studies while taking care of her child and attains a scholarship in England. When she goes for the scholarship interview held in Delhi, she came to meet Arjun and the love has its rebids. She leaves Maraar family and asks for divorce with Suresh. But he denies and plays tricks by depicting her as psychic. She makes a narrow escape with the help of her widowed mother and grandmother, even though the child is taken away by Suresh. Janu leaves to England and lives the awaited life with Arjun. In the midst, Suresh’s get ready for the divorce, as he wants a second marriage. Janu returns to India for divorce and taking Riya with her. The novel is a saga of a woman caught between traditional values and modern concepts.

The tradition with respect to women is bound on sacrifice, endurance and devotion to one's family irrespective of women's individuality. The novel gives instances which expose the women's place inside and outside their homes. Also, it depicts the overshadowing tradition that makes modern women into puzzled state.

The protagonist of the novel, Janu is a sixteen year old girl when the novel begins. She is torn between two cultures as she is born and brought up in Delhi by her Kerala Parents. Her different existence is explained by her as "I was a proper Kerala girl, even though I was born and grew up in distant Delhi" (Misra 11). Her Kerala Nair ancestry made her alien in the lands of Delhi and her Delhi life made her alien in Kerala. As she say's "These two places ran together in my [her] blood" (18). During her school life, she fell in love with a boy called Arjun. Even though, there was a lot of restrictions from her family they somehow managed to continue with it. Suddenly, Arjun leaves to England to pursue his higher studies. This make them depart and Janu is forced into the marriage with Suresh, a businessman of Maraar Family. The marriage proposals and following meeting are like interviews for a job. "We'd already assessed, from the few stilted meetings that had taken place that my prospective in-laws had orthodox taste in clothes." (Misra 65)

The marriage between Suresh and Janu takes place in Chottanikkara temple on the decided 'Muhurttam' on the very day of her birthday. Although, nobody remembers her birthday because for them 'Kanya Dhaan' is sounds more vital. The care that is given to choosing the ornaments and stitching clothes is not seen in choosing grooms. The choice is of the family not of the bride. The traditional way of marriage is not of individuals but they are alliances between the two families. Janu says:

Marriages in Kerala were never just marriages, they were 'alliances' .Alliances between just whom was the bit that wasn't always easy to work out. The parents? Families? Whole clan's, reaching back many ghostly generations? (Misra 66).

Also, Janu is more familiarized with the feet of the man than his face during the occasion of the marriage ceremony as a woman is not supposed to be arrogant in her looks. Also, this practice symbolizes women's life is going to be at the foot of the husband and his family. The family to which Janu is getting married is Maraar's, the proud and traditional Maraar's. Even though Maraar's doesn't ask for dowry, Janu's family provides her with as much as gold they can. When she comes to the house of Maraar's, they look at the ornamental assets, she has brought home and finds that it is not up to what they have given to their daughter Sati. Also, Janu is always criticized for her modern ways from Delhi. Janu is not given the similar consideration that is given to other women in the family.

In the midst of all these disparities, Janu tries her best to assimilate with the ways of Maraar's despite of her individuality. The modern men's demand for 'modern-traditional woman is evident through the conditions put forward by Mahesh during the marriage proposals. The novel mentions about the four conditions of his bride:

1. She had to be pretty.
2. She had to be young so that she would 'adjust'.
3. She had to be able to speak English well, so that he could take her to Bombay in the hoped-for expansion of his motel business.
4. Nothing else was too important. (96)

Janu was all of this for him but, no one asked about her wish as she was born to 'adjust'. So, she tried her to assimilate with them by surrendering her preferences, desires, sexuality and mobility. She wonders that "how my priorities had turned upside down in short a period of time" (100). Moreover, the patriarchal arrangement of the household is evident at the dining table, which served "(...) men first in the dining room, children alongside at the kitchen table, then the women, the drivers and servants and finally, after she'd fed everybody else, the old Ammumma." (83).

Janu believes that the arrival of a child to their life can change things but it worsens the situation. The child born for them is mentally challenged and it adds her duty to be a good mother, wife and daughter-in-law. The traditional approach that the

bringing up of the child is only the obligation of women can be seen in this novel too. In the midst of all these issues, she pursues her Bachelors and Masters degree. She takes her child, Riya to different schools. But, they reject her as she is mentally challenged. Later, Janu works as a volunteer in a special school and Riya is taken cared in that school. Being a sacrificial mother, Janu decides to take Riya to America which can make a better change in her and her daughter's life. Her notion of modernity lies in Abroad which wouldn't be like India. She says, "Women could live on their own and not be thought of as scarlet women or a member of some strange, unfortunate breed" (146). She clears the scholarship interview to pursue the higher studies. On the day of Interview, Janu meets Arjun and refreshes her passions. On returning from Delhi after the interview, she asks divorce from Suresh. This creates legal issues between Suresh and Janu, the Marrar's proclaim her to be mad and get treated by their family daughters. Her mother takes her forcibly to their home and her mother also goes along with her to file a divorce petition "To escape a marriage that wasn't a terribly bad one but wasn't very good either" (Misra 170). Janu's comes out of the veils of the norms of the society and lives life with Arjun. Even after that, she has gone for a legal fight for Riya, whom Suresh has taken forcibly on the quarrel between Janu and him. He leaves Riya, when he is getting married to another woman. Thus, Janu is a character that that surrenders to the patriarchal norms and liberate from it out her wish for a liveable life.

Janaki's mother is a second generation woman, imbibed by traditional ways of Kerala life, even though she lived her certain years far from Kerala. She looks for a perfect marriage for her daughter. She follows almost all customs and traditions of Hinduism. On being a widow, she transcends her life by restricting herself to domesticity and by wearing white sarees. She rejects the idea of love marriage, divorce and leaving India when Janu come's up with it. Later accommodate things on seeing the hardship of her daughter.

Whereas, Janu's mother-in-law the unnamed Maraar woman's attitude towards modern woman is disgusting. She looks down upon the woman who goes for job. She says, "Well. You can't expect any better when women go out to work, can

you?” (Misra 84) For her, she doesn't have to earn money. She has the duty to be a devoted wife, mother, grandmother and to manage the households. She thinks that the most prestigious way in which a woman can live her life is that of her. Also, her life give looks into matriarchy existed in high class Hindu families. She points out that “the Maraar's appeared to be taking the cue from the matriarch leading their delegation” (79). This may be the remnants of matriarchal system prevailed in Kerala Nair community. She is a dedicated grandmother to her daughter Sati's children.

Janu's paternal grandmother is a first generation women character, educated strong woman. She appears to be capable of taking decisions. Janu give details about Ammumma, who was “once an enthusiastic woman who used to round up the children of the workers on her paddy fields and insist on teaching them to read and write” (103).

Thus, the different generations of women, including Janu, Janu's mother, grandmother and mother-in-law demonstrates different responses to tradition and modernity. It is a fact that all the women give prime importance to the family, irrespective of their individual preferences.

On comparing and contrasting three different generations of women characters varied in time, caste, class and culture reveals the multitude of ways through which women lives their lives. The three novels provide instincts into the split consciousness of women caught between the contradictory notions of tradition, modernity and individuality. Although, different generations of women appear to be incongruous to each other, they are in a path of evolutionary process accommodating the nuances of the transforming culture.

The first generation women characters including grandmother, Thakuma and Ammumma are proud about their culture and traditions. All of these three characters from the novels are aged and widowed. The novel gives not many traces of the harsh experiences of the first generation women. They are portrayed as the spoke person's of tradition and culture. The widowhood empowers and weakens the characters at the same time based on the cultural nuances and geographical setting of the novels.

Grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is depicted as a woman with strong will and having her own perspective of life. She voices her protest through her twisted stories but does not revolt against it. And Thakuma stands as the spokesperson of the family's heritage, Kolkata's history and myths about women. She is the carrier of patriarchal values, even though she wants to assert the space of women in her family's lineage. She is a tool in the patriarchal tradition who urges other women characters to obey their men. Whereas, Ammumma in *The Ancient Promises* is an educated woman, who tries to educate the younger generation and stands with women who faces harsh oppressions in the patriarchal world. For the first generation women characters, widowhood is a way to find their space which may be denied in the marital life. They appear to exert their power over women characters and children, who might be once suppressed by their husbands and family.

Whereas, the second generation women characters like Sita, Mayamma, Ma, Kakima and Janu's mother are portrayed in clash between tradition and modernity. They confine themselves to the traditional roles of women as passive, sacrificial and submissive. Also, they surrender their individual preferences over the familial predilection. Sita's act of giving up Veena, Mayamma's and Ma's submission to domestic violence, Kakima's victimization in to patriarchal norms and Janu's mothers restrictions after her husband's death points to the suppressions of their individuality. Differentially, the other second generation women like Parvatamma and Trilokya Debi emphasize their individuality and creates their own way of life. And, Janu's mother-in-law seems to act as an agent of patriarchal values.

Moreover, the characters in the novel remind that how patriarchy works in society through different agencies rather than from a man in the family.

The concept of patriarchy, fetishized though it may have become, maintains a necessary focus on the idea that a woman's oppression is not an isolated misfortune under one man's tyrannical authority. What is more threatening is that she is at the receiving end of an entire system of social structures and practices based on the fascist ideology that men are and should be superior to women. (Roy 23)

In addition, the third generation women over and above the protagonists of the novels, Devi, Chetna, Janu fights against the orthodox traditions and tries to assert the individuality. The lives of these characters appear to be in conflict between tradition and modernity. Although, the three characters belong to different classes and castes of Indian society, they fight with the oppressive traditions that entangle women. They break the stereotypes and deny adhering to the patriarchal notions of womanhood. Thus, they overcome all the problems and predicaments through individual resistance.

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## Chapter 3

### Crossroads of Myths, Lore and Customs

#### 3.1 Crossroads in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

The women characters and incidents in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* are created on the backdrop of myths prevailing in Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as lore in Indian tradition. Throughout the novel she attempts to make parallels between the women characters and the epic characters that show deviations from the mainstream myths associated with womenhood.

Grandmother stands as the window that opens into the world of myths that are mysterious, twisted and ambiguous. The novel addresses the issues of women rooted in Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the contemporary world. The myths chosen by the Grandmother are the marginalized stories of women that are suppressed in the mainstream. Her stories are about Damayanti, Ganga, Gandhari, Amba and the girl who married a snake rather than glorified Sita or Savitri. And this shows how certain stories in Indian tradition are rewarded and others are submerged. Grandmother presents stories as answers to day-to-day life issues of women.

During the occasion of Devi's marriage she recalls her grandmother's story from Mahabharata about 'Swayamvara'. Nala was the king of Nishads, and Damayanti, the beautiful princess, had her heart fall for Nala. On the occasion of 'swayamvara', lots of bridegrooms from different kingdoms and even gods arrived for marrying her. But she was determined and brave to accomplish her will that was even hindered by gods. Grandmother wraps up the story with a moral, "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (20). The myth exposes the women's choice of selecting her partner prevailed in epic periods. However, Devi is not cunning as Damayanti and not fortunate to have swayamvara as in the epic. So, she has brought in to an arranged marriage with Mahesh.

Moreover, Grandmother retells the story of Gandhari in relation with the Devi's mother Sita's giving up of Veena. Gandhari is one among the characters in Mahabharata, who is married to Dritharastra a blind king. She was not aware that he was blind. On realizing this, she tied her eyes with a black cloth denouncing the world that her husband cannot see as a symbol of sacrifice. Grandmother subverts the story stating "In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing. But she tore off a piece of her thick red skirt and tied it tightly over her own eyes. She groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury" (29). The voice of a rebellious woman can be heard in this narration that protests against the submissiveness of woman. Similarly, in the novel Sita pulled out the strings of the wooden base. For the external world, it may be the symbol of self sacrifice but, for her it's a rebellious act out of woman's rage in the patriarchal hegemonic world.

In addition, Devi came to know about the story of Amba "the princess who shed her womanhood through her dreams of revenge and became a man" in relation with her cousin Uma's life. Uma was tortured and harassed by her husband and her father-in-law. Amba, Ambika and Ambalika are three princesses who were in the age of 'swayamvara'. On the occasion of 'swayavara', Amba the eldest one is about to garland the young king of Salwa, suddenly the hands Bheeshma seized and taken away with him. Nobody interrupted as if a woman has to fight her battles alone (36). Later, he left Amba and asked her to go back to Salwa. But, Salwa rejected her and said "Do you think I feast on leftovers? I'm a King. Being rejected, she went back to Bheeshma and asked him to take as his wife. Bheeshma denied saying her that he cannot marry him as he forgoes his worldly life. Being rejected from both men and "a woman without a husband has no home" (38). On hearing this, Amba went to the forest with rage and prayed to Lord Siva. Lord Siva blessed her garlands and said that whoever will wear this garland can kill Bheeshma. She lobbed the garland around the pillar in King Drupada's court and went to the forest. There she sacrificed herself by burning her and reborn as the daughter of Draupada. She was the daughter raised as son because a daughter raised as a daughter cannot be a man. During the time of Kurukshetra battle, re-born Amba wore the garland and fulfilled her fury. This myth

“portray a woman’s honor as located in her sexuality, an honor which is fragile and easily fractured” (Krishnan 31).

Another important story that Hariharan fortify is of Ganga, who rejected the role of motherhood. When Bharata King Shantanu rode along near the river Ganga, she came to meet a beautiful woman with blue transparent robes and jewels. Shantanu fell in love with the river goddess and approached her. She asked him to promise not to ask her name and not to stop her from what she is doing (88). He agreed to her demand, lead a life. There were seven children born to them, but Ganga threw every child to the river. Shantanu witnessed everything with great sorrow. When the eighth child is born, the king stopped her. She said him “then take him, and be father and mother to him from life”. Inspired by this story the rejection of motherhood can be traced in the life of Devi. This myth can be connected with reality as represented in the novel in relation with the characters of Devi and Parvatiamma who rejects the notion of piety and sacrifice in motherhood.

Likewise, Grandmother articulates the story of a girl who married the snake. One childless couple calls upon gods to get a child. The prayers were answered but, it was a little black snake. When the snake grew into adulthood, his mother wants to make a marriage for him. His father started a journey to find a good daughter-in-law. The host of the house in the mid way of the father’s travel granted his daughter to marry. Thus, “the pearl like maiden married the venom tongued snake” (Hariharan 33). The marriage was done and she became the devoted wife. Through the love of the wife, the snake changed into human. He was one cursed men born as snake. This myth is delivered on the occasion of Gauri’s failed marriage and love affair. Grandmother articulates this myth to teach Devi, the devotion and love one should have towards her husband. But, Devi wants to use the myth to enlighten Gauri. She says, “But I still longed to give her some clue, a hint that would enable her to penetrate the snake skin that spread itself between her feminine fulfillment” (Hariharan 34).

Whereas, Baba’s stories were bound around Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Pundara Dasa, Thyagaraja and along with the quotes of Manu. These lores of the elite music

world aim at creating Devi to become a woman of virtuous qualities that makes her a good wife and mother. Hariharan affirm that the center point of Baba's stories have "an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife" (51)

One of the stories that Baba tells is about Muthuswamy Dikshitar and his two wives "like the sun and the moon". The fair has a desire for ornaments and Muthuswamy through his music impressed the goddess Ambika. She in the dazzling ornaments blessed the fair wife one to forget the desire for ornaments. Through this story, Baba teaches the norm that woman should be free of worldly desires. Another story of Purandara Dasa stresses upon wife's duty to enlighten the divine lamb in husband. Purandara Dasa is a composer of Karnataka music and a tradesman is miserly man after his fortunes. Once a Brahmin asks him some money to conduct his son's 'Upanayanam' but Dasa denied. But his wife, Sarasvati Bhai gives her nose ring to the Brahmin. Dasa came to see the nose ring about to sell in his own shop and ask his wife to show her nose ring. Disgusted in the occurrence, the wife tries to poison herself. But, on doing this the potion disappeared instead a replica of her rose ring appeared. This changed the Purandara Dasa. the stories of Baba circulated the notions of sacrosanct marriage, the duty to serve husband and the heaven that would be awarded for 'good' wife. The makes the call of dharma falls on Devi rather than Mahesh, her husband. Furthermore, Baba's story of composer Thyagaraja and his wife reside on the notion that good woman will die as 'sumangali' and role of women in providing 'moksha' to her husband. Through the story he reiterates that "By public confession, repentance, penance, repetition of holy mantras, and by gifts, the sinner is released from sin. That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance" (67). Also, he intentionally omits the reading about 'Kriya', the fierce woman and focuses only on 'Kriti' Baba's stories are presented to confer the Indian belief, tradition and virtues of womanhood to Devi. He helps Devi to "help the transition from talented bride to efficient, reliable daughter-in-law" (102).

Hariharan through the voice of Devi makes the comparison between Baba's lores and Grandmother's mythical stories. She avers:

Baba's stories remind me of my grandmother's, but they are also different. They are less spectacular, they ramble less. 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 (51).

### **3.2 Crossroads in *Hangwoman***

The novel *Hangwoman* interweaves history and mythology with reality. The novel presents the myths and history of Kolkata and their family lineage in an epic canvas. These stories have a great role in framing the characters as well as the course of the novel. Except certain lores, delivered by Phaniphushan Grrdha Mullick, Thakuma stands as the mouthpiece of history and myths.

The overemphasis on the myths, traditions of Grrdha Mullicks and history of Kolkata is criticized by the characters within the novel such as Ramu da. Ramu da teases Thakuma stating that

the only events which our family members hadn't seen with her own eyes were Shiva's all consuming Tandava with the body of Sati-- who had immolated herself in Daksha's sacrificial altar—and Vishnu's splitting of her body into pieces with his Sudarshana Chakra, with the pieces scattering over eighteen places sent Thakuma into a fit. (11)

However, Thakuma linked this story with her mythical knowledge about Kalighat. She avers, "Kalighat is the place where Devi Sati's right toe fell when Bhagwan Mahavishnu cut up the body with his Chakra" (11).

Lord Shiva was a god of rigorous self-denial and self-discipline who have no intentions to marry. Brahma felt that Shiva should be married and needed progeny. Also, he could only be married to a goddess, so Adishakti born as the daughter Daksha, who was the son of Brahma. Daksha did not know that Sati, his daughter was a goddess. Through immense penance, Sati impressed Shiva and married him

against the will of Daksha. In a Yaga conducted by Daksha, Sati attended it violating Shiva's words. During the Yaga, Daksha disgraced Shiva and Sati. In that rage, Sati had thrown her into the Yaga fire and committed suicide. Shiva filled with grief and rage took the burnt body of Sati and started 'Tandava' to destroy the earth. To save the earth, lord Vishnu cut the dead body of Sati into fifty one pieces with his 'Chakra' and that had fallen in different places across the earth. To escape from the rage of Shiva and on the virtuous act of Sati, temples were built on the places where the body parts had fallen. Thakuma connects this story with the temple in Sonagachi, where the toe of Devi Sati had fallen. Through this story, she stresses on the epic connection with Kolkata and 'Devalok'. Also, this points to the act of a virtuous woman who has sacrificed her life for her husband.

The myth about Devi Sati points to the two faces of the goddess. "The two faces of the goddess are both faces of power, but as a properly married spouse, she is the embodiment of grace and benevolence; as the independent god, she threatens to destroy the very basis of the social order" (Ganesh 83). This points to how women varied in their prospectus were there in Indian myths. Then, how can one say that women who are submissive and sacrificing are the symbol of Indian womanhood? Indian myths provide multitudes of women characters varied in their characteristics.

After that, Thakuma moves on to the historical creation of Kolkata. She traces the history of Kolkata that came into existence besides river Hooghly before 'Chaturvarnya' system developed and even before the existence of 'Bharat'. And there was crime and punishment in the country. Then, she starts narrating about the first ancestor of them Radharaman Mullick, who was a doctor and became first hangman in their family history. He had befallen the first duty to possess a woman, who came to him in fever. When the king Mahanandin died, his son on Dasi Mahapatma Nanda acquired the thrown. After that a war broken between the son's and the legal prince attained victory. And Mahapatma Nandha had given the death penalty. The forefather approached the king to express the will to hang him. The king sanctioned it. The first hanging was unsuccessful and in the second hanging, forefather invented the technique of hanging by placing the rope between the third

and the forth vertebrae. Thus, possessed the woman named Chinmayi Devi. She was denied to live with her lover and forcefully taken by Radharaman. This lore sheds light on the subjugation of woman that has taken place in previous centuries.

After the marriage, she has given birth to ten of his children. Then, also she didn't give her heart to him. She silently revolted against this

(...) without uttering a word, She never offered her breast to her ten children; never cuddled them, she took refuge in her own silence, the biggest punishment he could ever receive. When she moves in bed, her large eyes stay as still as if they were dead (...) (109)

This story asserts the oppression of women from the historical times and their silent revolts. Moreover, Thakuma always dwells on the stories of hangings and this has affected psychologically her as well as the other members of the family. She is greatly occupied by these stories as if she has done it a hundred times. "As she retold the stories of hangings, Thakuma's hands knotted and loosed a noose on an imaginary cord. That was a habit common to all the women of our family" (Meera 13). Likewise, most of the characters are obsessed with stories of hanging.

The Lore, delivered by Phanibhushan is of Amartya Ghosh who had killed the husband and three children of Devapriya whom he loved. This story points their patriarchal fingers against the unfaithful wife in the institution of marriage. The lore about Ashapoorna, the woman whom Baba loved shows the life of woman thrown into prostitution.

And Thakuma provides the series of women who eloped with their lovers and men who married several times. Agnimitra Mullick who lived during the reign of Emperor Asoka had married six times and had no children in first five wives. And the sixth wife died during the childbirth. To look after the son, he married another woman who eloped with another man. In another story, Udayamitra Mullick had married once and had seven children in the illegitimate relationship. Later, his wife eloped with her lover and the lover murdered the woman in a jungle and stole her ornaments. These

all stories show how the man can perform their desires and how women are restricted to do that.

On hearing these stories, the little girl Chetna ask Thakuma that “So you mean to say that women of those had no troubles at all?” (109). And she later found that the stories of the women are not recorded in the history of them. The narration points to the denial of space the woman that still continues.

Contrary to this, certain rebellious women’s stories were preserved in Thakuma’s stories. One among this was of Ratnamalika, born on the thirteenth century. She had witnessed her mother is thrown to the funeral pyre after her father’s death in the name Sati. When she was of seven years old, she was forced by the family to get married. She revolted against this, “She splattered cow dung water on the groom’s family, snarling furiously that she was Chamundi, not Sati” (124).

Later she made dark veil on her face, frightened people and cursed people. She was tied to the pillar and treated by exorcists. She made predictions like the attack towards Bengal, which came true as Muhammed Bin Bakhtyar Khilji attacked Bengal. Later, the horseman of Khilji released her and she shed the veil before him. She was infatuated with the horseman and she ran away with him. After several years she came back in front of her house as Muslim woman carrying a child. Thus, this story focuses on the subverted women characters that fought against the patriarchal institutions and went behind their desires.

Thakuma always warns Chetna who laughs without any reason as “Women should not laugh. That’s a bad omen. The house where a woman’s laughter rings—it won’t be long before it collapses” (172). Then, Thakuma told the story of Pingalakeshini, the one and only female executioner in their history. Pingalakeshini is a thirteen century woman whose real name was Tripurasundari. “She was married at the age of seven, according to the prevailing custom.” (174). While she was travelling along with her husband Turghral Tughan Khan heard her laugh and was smitten by her glowing beauty. Her husband surrendered her to Khan, old as her father out of fear and had taken the money he provides. Khan carried her to his palace tortured

brutally. “Whenever she was summoned to his room’s, the guards would have to carry out her torn and ravaged body afterwards” (175). She had given birth to a child every year,. But, they were dispatched with their own umbilical cords. When Narasimha Dev attacked Bengal, he has taken Pingalakeshini and imprisoned her. Later, Khan attacked back and taken her back. The torture continued for several years. When Balban attacked Bengal Tripura sundari helped them to fail Khan. As a reward for this, she asked Balban the life of Khan and he sanctioned it. She made the gallows tree and hanged him. Then, after fifteen years her laugh echoed in the public. This story is about the women’s rage against the potential oppression and torture.

Chetna during the occasion of her interview in ‘Hangwoman’s Diary’ retold the story of Kadambari said by Thakuma. “Kadambari was sentenced to death for killing her husband while he was having sex with another woman. She had hit him hard on the head” (211). There were two allegations against her. First, she murdered her husband, her living god. Second, she had interrupted the sexual act, which made a man’s life as man meaningful.” The pundits in the court argued about which of these was more sinful and decided that both are equally sinful and need heavy punishment. When the hangman asked about the reason for murder Kadambari replied that it was out of love and she was trying to save him from the other woman. The story questions the hypo critic ways of patriarchal dominance.

Moreover, the myth behind the creation of Kalighat temple is related to two women: Devi Sati and Lakshminikanth. It is for Lakshminikanth the divine vision and the ‘swayambhu linga’ is received. And her hut is later turned into the Kalighat temple. Also, the myth of Annapoornas spiritual journey for ‘nirvana’ following Buddha, even though he had warned women not to leave their home like his male disciples. Annapoorna left her husband and children for the sake of ‘nirvana’. People called her heartless and said that “a woman’s ‘nirvana’ lies in the service to the husband and children” (270). On hearing this, Chetna felt that “I [she] was the woman who had declared two thousand years ago” (270). Thus, the novel gives several instants of deviant women who are marginalized by the society.

In addition, through the tale of Khona, the scholar woman who defeated Mihira Meera points out the scholarly women in the myths. And, the myth of Utpalavarna is about the shadows that follow women who set out to live her life. Moreover, the myth of Manasa the orphaned goddess shows the double marginalization of Dalit woman. On the other hand, the prostitutes of Sonagachi believed that they are Agrevali's who were born in the race of Apsara's. So that for Agrevali's prostitution is a matter of pride.

Thus, the myths and lores in the Hangwoman give a glimpse into marginalized and deviant women in history. Also, these myths points to enduring oppression of women from the Neanderthal times.

### **3.3 Crossroads in *Ancient Promises***

The novel *Ancient Promises* presents varied roles of women with respect to cultural practices, customs, and beliefs. Different from the other two novels, this novel has many instances of cultural and institutional practices rather than myths and lores.

The novel gives several instances into the lighting of 'Nilanilaku', which is bound to women in the family. When Janu enters the family of Maraar's , she asked to "come out and hold this vilakku with the flame behind"(7). These are the symbol of blessed occasions and sacrificial womanhood. Women are supposed to be lighting these lamps as they are the one who determines the course of the household and family. If women are chaste, devoted and managing their household the family and the generations would be blessed and the home has the divine presence. Also, 'Kuravas' are produced to keep away the spirits during ceremonial occasions.

The custom of 'Thulabharam' is followed for the fulfilment of the wishes and for avoiding hindrances in life. During the occasion of Janu's marriage, grandmother promised the family deity 'Mulakkal Devi' to make 'Thulabharam' if the marriage ends well.

Like the 'swayamvara' in Puranas, traditional Nair woman's marriage is termed as 'Kanya dhaan', where the father of the house submits her to a good husband as a

donation. This will make his daughters life safe and worthy. Similarly, Janu is given to Suresh as kanya daan, hoping that her life would be under fortune. This are believed to be descended from Indian epic traditions. “The wedding ceremonies of Sita, of her sisters and of Draupadi are occasions for emphasising the notion of the Kanya daan (gifting the daughter) and all its attendant ideologies of the comparative positions of men and women, paraya-dhan (or daughter as wealth of the matrimonial home)” (Krishnan 124). As this, women are uprooted from their own family and planted in her husband’s family. In this process, “All brides cried and then stayed and loved and got loved”. These are the myths perpetrated over centuries by the traditional families. Also, women are restricted to households by making them fear or by bounding them to something interesting in the household. Grandfather in Thodupuram make Janu believe that the stone in the pond is Tortoise. “It was one way to ensure I [all women] stayed safe within the compound without being tempted to wander off. Just another myth to keep me safe” (106).

Janu always feels that there is nothing truthful behind the myths. So she used to call, happiness, marriage, safety and soon a myth. Also, Widow is considered as a bad omen and the result woman’s sins. Widows are made to wear white saree’s and excepted from celebrations. Janu say’s:

Ma or Ammumma could go once the temple round had been done. Only women who had the good fortune to still have lived with their men went out after dark, to the Cinema and restaurants and other people’s houses. These pleasures had passed for my mother and grandmother and an unspoken sadness had descended over the house that had once joyfully received hordes of children when the school closed. (144)

Also, a woman lost their son while they are living is considered sinful. When people started murmur in Janu’s father’s dead like

Ishwaraa...What has this poor woman done to have her son snatched away like this! What great sin has made her deserve this!

I wanted to stand up and explain to them that my Ammumma had lived a blameless life. And had taught dozens of children to read and write.” (123)

Also, the life stories of women delivered by Amma made “numerous slanted references to girls who cared not a whit for their poor husbands who worked so hard for them.”(167).The patriarchal conditioned society can be witnessed at these instants.

Moreover, women heirs are not much promoted for doing the offerings to dead ancestors. Also, there is a taboo against women in menstruation. As Janaki is the only heir, she appeases ancestors on the day to remember the dead ones. The emotional turbulence of a woman in the time of her menstruation and restriction on her is explained by Janu. She narrates:

The wetness beneath me had become unbearable and I jumped up, suddenly unable to carry on... there, on the floor where I had been sitting was a dark wet patch...was it...it couldn't be...blood? My sari was stained... great red blotches on white cotton... and now I could feel it dribbling down my legs. I could hear my grandmother scream through a long tunnel...her screams mingling with kadalamma's howls from the sea...With surprisingly strong hands she grabbed me by her hands and flung me out of the temple...When returned Ammummas' house,...it's a terrible curse to defile a temple like that...Ishwara! That elayathu will have to do all kinds of poojas to clean it up and restore the sanctity. Sometimes a temple can never regain it's sanctity after it's been debased like that (213).

The above incident reveals how women is marginalized and subjugated due to her biological existence. Also, how women are becoming the victims of patriarchal customs.

In addition, the novel provides the practices of 'Mudiyattam' which removed evils from the body of women. Women's body is considered as sinful in the most of the rituals and customs. Even though, the most of the men worshipped goddesses. In

short, the cultural practices and traditional customs represented in *Ancient Promises* restricted women inside and out the space of the home.

On understanding space for women in the customs and practices, it is inevitable to have a basic understanding of the socio-cultural and geographical setting of the novels. The three novels are built on the backdrop of Hindu traditions in India, closely tying it with the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, though the cultural receiving of these traditions are different. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is set on a Tamil Brahmin family, who enjoys the privileges of an upper class elite family. The 'Agraharam', US education of Devi, Sita's playing of Veena and Parvatamma's search for God denying the family are the result of their privileges. Mayamma and Gauri are the under privileged sections of the society who faces much hardships than women in Devi's family.

Whereas, the novel *Hangwoman* depicts the life of an executioners family, who are under privileged and marginalised sections of the society. The novel is set on the backdrop of Sonagachi and Kolkata. The hangman community who performs what considered ritually impure duties are classified under lower class and caste. The poverty is a reality to Chetna's family, which makes the problems amplify doubly. For the women in the lower strata's of society, it's a kind of dual oppression. The Mulick's family praises Goddess like Kali and Durga, rather than Saraswati and Sita. Thakuma, Ma, Kakima and Chetna are bound to the hardships of livelihood. There are strong economic reasons behind the performance of each women character. In addition, Trilokya Debi's life as a prostitute has traditional and cultural reinforcement as they are 'Agreveli's' who descended from 'Apsara's'. Also, the act of Kakima is a part of her predicament as a lower class woman.

While, *Ancient promises* is a novel placed on the background of a middle class Kerala Nair 'tharawad'. The prevailing of matrilineal system and literacy are the keen features of Kerala. The novel is not dealt on the matrilineal system but the patriarchal system in which family is given great value. Different from the other novels the first generation woman Ammumma is portrayed as educated. She does not tell stories but tries to literate children and encourage them to get educated. The institutions like

marriage, family and religion regulates the performance of women characters. The characters like Ammumma, Janu's mother and Janu on the first place lives their life as the society and family expect them to do. The wearing of white sari, 'kanya daan' and restrictions on temple during menstruation period are the taboos results from the social customs of Kerala Hindu society.

The three novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Hangwoman*, and *Ancient Promises* are set on the backdrop of myths, lores and social customs which greatly determines the predicament of women characters.

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## Chapter 4

### Crossroads of Enduring oppression, Self-realization, and Identity

#### 4.1 Crossroads in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* focuses on the problems and predicaments faced by Indian women under the veil of patriarchy, class and caste. The incidents of physical, emotional and social oppression can be found within different generations women. The novel sheds light on women's lives that suffers, endure and transcends the boundaries set to them. The novel draws on the centuries of women's oppression rooted from the epic times of Ramayana and Mahabharatha.

The character of the grandmother is portrayed without implicating much on the sufferings of her own life. She is the window through which the marginalized epic characters of Amba, Ganga, Damayanti, and Gandhari come out of the veil. Usually, women of previous generations are portrayed as silent sufferers of the patriarchal norms. Contradictorily, the grandmother shows a strong willed subverted woman within the tradition or either a woman who finds the freedom as well as diversions within the tradition. The stories of Damayanti, Ganga, Gandhari, Amba, and girl who married snake are given new dimensions of feminism in the novel. Previously, the story of Gandhari is presented as the symbol of sacrificial women. The twisted story questions Gandhari's deed of covering the eyes with red clothes rather than black clothes avow the rebellion in women against concealing the truth by the patriarchy. The stories of Amba, Damayanti, and Ganga are undermined as these do not fit into men's wish about women. The enduring oppression of these stories under the patriarchal veil finds the identity in this novel. This is the result of women writers' identification of their own selves.

The life stories of Mayamma, Sita, Uma, and Gauri are of enduring oppression. Mayamma is a lower caste old lady who has performed the roles of a daughter, wife, housekeeper, and mother. She suffered under her husband, mother in law and later

under her son. She is a symbol of suffering and endurance of women in Indian society marginalised by class and caste. She never questions the patriarchal order neither makes a choice of her own. She is submissive, humble and passive woman surrender to the victimization of notions of marriage, family, and motherhood. Mayamma is thrown to marriage at the age of twelve.

Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, firsthand. She had coveted birth, endured life, and nursed death. And she had won some small victory—if you could call it by such a grand name—through that ragged belief that carried within her. (Hariharan 135)

The gambling husband and cruel mother-in-law made her life a saga of sufferings. She was harassed in the name of dowry, inability to conceive a child and for the delay in household works. Mayamma is an allusive representative of women under the domestic violence of marriage institution. The enduring oppression of men and women with patriarchal conditioning can be seen in the life of Mayamma;

She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my barrenness. I burned, my thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails (Hariharan 113).

The problems and predicaments of women in marriage are clear through Mayamma's monologue that "I envied her [mother-in-law's] widow's sleep, light and undisturbed" (123). The motherhood is glorified in the society, but the insensitivity towards woman as a human being is evident through the depiction Mayamma's delivery of her son. She explains:

Then the blood came, too soon, too soon. No expense was spared; my husband wanted the new village doctor, not the midwife. He shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my blood, my dying son. She is strong, she will

bear many more children, he said. But after Raja was born two years later, I still groaned with pain. (Hariharan 122)

Moreover, the realization of the suppressions within the man oriented society is there for Mayamma. But she thinks that it is the fate of women rather than revolting against the oppression. Here, her caste, class, illiteracy, and tie with tradition play an eminent role. Mayamma represents a woman marginalized in multiple levels.

The character of Parvatiyamma, the mother-in-law of Devi, presents a woman who has gone in search of self and identity getting far from the roles of a wife and mother. "But Parvatiamma had been more ambitious. She had, like a man in a self absorbed search for a god, stripped herself of the life allotted to her, the life of a householder" (64). Her spiritual choice is a way to liberation. Parvatiamma's negation of wifehood and motherhood asserts the individuality and identity of a woman far from prescribed roles. She is the woman who goes beyond the boundaries set to them as a part of self-realization which is far more important for a woman than sanctity.

Contradictorily, Gauri, the housemaid in Devi's childhood is married to an animal like man with the dowry of twenty sovereigns of gold. Her character shows the evil of dowry prevailing society, which consumes the life of women. She rebels against the oppression by her husband and ran away with the brother-in-law whom she loves like a proud and unrepentant housewife. Even though people are furious against them, Devi wants to make her aware much about the life more than marriage. She says, "But I still longed to give her some clue, a hint that would enable her to penetrate the snake skin that spread itself between her feminine fulfillment" (34). After all these turmoil's, she appears to be a cheerful self, who made the choice of her own.

Also, Devi's mother Sita presents the transforming woman who once remained passive and later identifies self. She stopped playing Veena after her marriage on the cautious warning of father-in-law, to pay attention to household duties. After that, she bestowed her talent and individuality to turn herself into "a wife, a daughter in law" (30). She breaks the strings of Veena. It is questionable whether it is out of rage or of

sacrifice. This Sita alludes to the 'Gandhari' in grandmother's story. It is said, that "her talent had set her apart from the other girls; so had her unfeminine determination" (136) Later, she grew into a woman who can take decisions of her own and instead of her husband Mahadevan. The strong willed Sita is evident on the Mahadevan's death in South Africa where she burns the bundle of papers on which he lied dead and the body in "a modern, sanitized crematorium" (106). Aftermath, her whole life is dedicated to her daughter Devi and sends her to the US against the oppositions from people. Throughout Sita's life, she hated illusion and she focused on doing things for Mahadevan and Devi, she ruled with an iron hand. Although, she feels distressed by Devi's action to quit Mahesh and elope with Gopal. She realizes that whatever lies on is sorrow, so she returns to her passions. The action of playing Veena at the end of the novel is a symbol of liberation and return to her individuality. Instead of dwelling on past, she becomes a free woman devoid of the roles assigned.

In addition, Devi's cousin Uma stands as a passive woman who became victimized under the patriarchal marriage institution. She was a woman married to a drunkard, lived with his father and stepmother. Every night she was tortured by husband and later molested by her father-in-law. She "grew into terror when her drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips." (35). This points to hypocritical relations in the Indian society where women are persecuted.

The protagonist Devi, suffer under the norms and traditions of patriarchy. Even though, there is no physical violence against her; she is in lonely and dejected by her husband, Mahesh. Mahesh's coldness and his long trips make Devi feel dejected and unworthy. Mahesh is impassionate and insensitive towards Devi, who does not have a job, somebody to love and make her feel worthy. Mahesh's loveless sex for his flesh persuading to Devi's motherhood and instruction to become a woman with traditional values suffocate her existence and selfhood. The identity crisis of Devi and the burden of marriage are felt by Devi as that fears her like a knife above her neck. She avers:

I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, ...The games it

plays with me are ignominious ... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (Hariharan 54)

The individuality of Devi is not accommodated by her husband. He says, "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want? (74). The comparison to her to her own grandmother and other women makes her 'selfhood' and 'identity' questionable. The realization that she does not have space in the house and marital life of Mahesh makes the revolt against the dominations on her.

The rejection of motherhood is a powerful step towards her individuality and identity. The refusal of the sperms of Mahesh is elementary in the assertion of self and creation of her identity. This can be considered as a revenge on Mahesh and the whole patriarchal society. She rejects the idea to become a slavish follower of her husband. Mahesh feel odd about the decision of Devi not to have children. He exclaims "You look so fragile, so feminine ... It's hard to believe that you don't want a child" (93). This rebellion aroused in her as a part of self-realization that she is more than a sexual object, devoted wife and mother. She does not want to be like the patient sufferer like her mother on Mayamma. She denies the illusions of tradition and moral norms so that she set for a journey in search of her identity.

In addition, she leaves Mahesh in search of a space to grow and reaches Gopal. Later, she finds that he is a flirting person living in his world. She walks out of Gopal as well. While, she leaves "she covered the mirror with the silk so that the room suddenly became darker, and everything ...the sleeping body of Gopal, were themselves again, no longer reflections" (138). This indicates the closing of her past life; she even does not need the remembrance of the past life. The action of boarding train to Madras is in a way a journey to her own self and identity.

Thus, the crisis of Devi's identity can be traced within the patriarchal driven society that makes her inept to make a decision between being a devoted wife or rebellious lover. At the end of the novel, she flees from Dan, Mahesh and Gopal proclaiming her identity as a free woman. Devi comes out of the traditional values that caged women to submissive position without considering the individuality of women resulted from the mistreatment of her in the domestic and social spheres.

Devi's choice was split between Mahesh and Gopal, but she has chosen neither as her destiny instead searched for her own identity. She has broken the world of myths and traditions and started creating 'her' world.

Towards the end of the novel, Devi draws a parallel between the characters of herself, Mayamma and Sita. "She thought of the three of them, Mayamma, Sita and herself. Three of the women who walked a tightrope and struggled for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves" (135). Thus, the woman characters in *The Thousand faces of Night* undergo suffering and later, the characters like Devi, Sita and Mayamma surfaces out for their existence.

#### **4.2 Crossroads in *Hangwoman***

*Hangwoman* portrays the woman who breaks the stereotype and rise up above the male-centered universe. The idea of a hangwoman is unfamiliar to the Indian system, which restricted the woman from doing certain jobs. Also, the novel presents an array of women characters under marginalization and subjugation. Chetna is one among the characters in the Indian fiction that shows the awakening of a female self.

The novel written with three generations of women explores the social and professional existence of women. The female characters like Thakuma, Ma, Kaki ma, Trilokya Debi, Niharika, and Chetna can be seen as affected by patriarchal dominance in their life. Certain characters like Thakuma and Trilokya Debi find their space within the existing system whereas the characters like Ma, Kaki ma, Niharika and Chetna are marginalized and subjugated. The novel portrayed in the epic canvas represents the transition of women like Chetna surfacing above the conventional orthodoxy.

The novel revolves around the female characters doubly marginalized because of their caste and gender. The characters have to undergo domestic and social oppression in the male dominated society.

Thakuma, the grandmother is a strong-willed woman upholding the traditions of Grrdha Mullicks. She is a woman that cannot be associated with the traditional

definitions of women as fragile, weak and passive. She finds the space of her own by retelling the stories of executions as if “Thakuma spoke as if she had done it hundred times. As she retold the stories of hangings, Thakuma’s hand knotted and loosened a noose on an imaginary cord. That was a habit common to all women of our family” (Meera 13). Even though Thakuma is the woman conditioned with patriarchal notions, she claims for the tradition regardless of the gender. She favors the one who fits to their traditions like Chetna and Baba as well as opposes the one who deviates from the legendary tradition of their family like Ma, Kaku and Kakima. For her, the world is divided into two sections, the clan of executioners and the ‘other’. She narrates the history of Kolkata and her family throughout the novel. It is she who gives the account of Pingalakeshini who is believed to be the only female executioner in their history and encourages Chetna to take the rope. Being so much into the history and traditions, she is unsympathetic towards things the endless oppressions of women in her household. Ever after, the murder of Kaku and Kaki ma, she tries to support her elder son who has upheld the family’s prestige as a hangman. In addition, she supports her son’s extramarital affairs as she believes that it increases his ‘manliness’. Her relations with other women like Ma and Kaki ma is not friendly. There are no direct implications of Thakuma’s suffering but her unsympathetic approach towards the women may be the result of ongoing oppression that can be traced from the ancient times.

Differentially, Ma or Sachinamayi Devi is the victim in the oppressive male centered universe. She undergoes physical, emotional and psychological torments. She stands as the allegory to enduring suppression of women in the Indian society. The institution of marriage in her life is lifetime imprisonment and the sindoor strewn liberally in her forehead is the symbol of sacrifices and suffering. Chetna’s narration of her mother’s impregnation, out of which Chetna is born shows terrific conquest on female body and identity. “he [Baba] grabbed Ma while she was buying vegetables in the market and tried to fuck her in public view” (Meera 3). Baba, her husband used to have affairs with a lot of woman named Malti, Savitri, Sudakshina, Ashapoorna and so on. Baba’s claim, “No matter whether she is—inside Sonagachi or inside the house—a woman serves the same purpose”(93) shows the objectification of women

inside and outside their homes. And she is the imprisoned 'sexual object' in the home. More than this, the worst example of domestic violence can be in her life. Yet, she endures everything and performs the 'duty' of a wife. Chetna's statement of , "All this while, Mother, bleeding from her nose, had been cooking fish for father in the kitchen" (51) points to the predicament of Indian women in the household. Even though, she is a sufferer in the marriage institution she wants Chetna to get married as soon as possible. She avers "For a woman like us, marriage is an escape route. It was, for me. A place to sleep...some food, at least once a day..." (251). Also, she opposes the idea of Chetna's job as hang woman. She wishes that Chetna should live a life of a dignified woman as she is an educated woman.

She is aware of the dehumanizing oppressions of her husband and tries to revolt against this. But she cannot fulfill this as she does not have a 'room of her own' and economic independence. Thus, she continues as the prey to the patriarchal arrogance rather than searching for her identity.

In addition, the enduring oppression can be seen in lives of Niharika and Kaki ma. Niharika is the sister of Chetna who is married against the will of her, providing the dowry and later she committed suicide as a result of the domestic violence she has undergone. And Kaki ma the sister in law of Phanibhushan is killed in rage of him for defying the tradition and for becoming a deviant woman. Both of them stand as the victim of patriarchal customs and traditions.

Contradictorily, the protagonist of the novel Chetna Grrdha Mullick is a twenty two year old woman, who breaks up the potential oppressions of the tradition bound society through her conscience. The novelist stresses on the individual resistance and negotiation of the identity of Chetna as a way to liberation of whole women in the all arenas of life.

Chetna, the descend of Mullicks family was born and brought under the domineering father Phanibushan Grddha Mullick. She was considered as a second choice, till Ramu da's was crippled. She is not allowed to pursue her education after plus two due to the financial impediments and lacking sanction from family. Her father

believes that there is no point in educating a woman which will not benefit a marriage life.

The whole events rise due to Jatindra Banerji's impending hanging who has raped and murdered a thirteen year old girl. Chetna comes into the consideration of the executioners' tradition and governments' job because the man heir is not physically fit and the age of the father exceeds the limit. Baba makes her into the job without enquiring about her opinion saying that "She needs to come as a formality, that's all" (21). His aim was to earn money anyhow rather considering her as an individual.

Chetna's ability to make the noose first comes into light when she confronted Maruti Prasad who had slid under her armpits and spread it on her breasts(8). She suddenly made a noose with her own dupatta, made it around his neck and pulled it over the windows rail. She suffocated him and escaped herself the exploitation. The first awareness of her physical and inner strength reveals here. After this, she states, "I was afraid to look at my own hands. I had not realized that my hands were so strong, so rough" (Meera 9). Father does not allow her to go alone afterward.

With the introduction of Sanjeev Kumar Mitra to the plot, Chetna is subjugated by two men, himself and by her father. Later, Chetna is appointed as the first woman executioner in India, assistant and successor to her father, Phanibhushan Mullick, who is of eighty-eight years of old and have executed four hundred and fifty-one condemned men. And she is being part of the media sensations and commits a contract with Sanjeev Kumar Mitra, representative of CNC Channel. By this, she has submitted all rights of transmitting and publishing interviews related to the awaiting execution to the channel, until the date of Jatindranath Banerjee's execution. Along with this, the body of Chetna is taken granted by Mitra. "Defiling the secrets of my body with filthy looks and dirty words, secrets which I had kept safe for someone who would desire and respect me deeply" (41). He sexually harasses her when he first time he visits her home as revenge against her denial of taking Ramu da's pictures. He grabs her left breast and squeezes it hard (43) and exploitation continues while she travels with him. She loved him once, but his ways of objectifying behavior

confuse her. She lies in a conflict of “desire and disappointment tormented me in equal measure” (88). His intention with her on the first half is of a media person thriving for sensational news and money. During the hanging demonstrations in the jail, Chetna reveals her excellent skill towards the job.

One day, while she was standing near to the gallows tree, Mitra pulled the liver and she had fallen down to the underground and he jumped into it and physically abuses her. This was the time she wanted solace from the people around her. But, “no one took very seriously the wounds on my lips, breasts and stomach. Nor did they see the fatal wounds in my soul...That was the turning point in my story. After that, I did not have the heart to let him off” (79). From, there onwards, she started revolting against him and the patriarchy. She hung her own subjugated identity.

After that, she raised the voice against the approaching oppressions. When Sanjeev Kumar Mitra approaches her she faces it boldly and speaks out. “What the hell do you think? That you can get away with anything? Is my body your plaything? I lack only money, not self respect. I don’t need to sell my body for money” (Meera 115). However, the women in the household itself try to support the man oppressing them. Also, she fights against IG Srinath Mullicks sexual harassment without trying to impress people. She neglects the external pressures and obeys her conscience. She denies Mitra and the worries about her marriage. Chetna points out “I need someone who loves me, not someone who loves my job” (42)

Underlying patriarchy in the whole Indian system is revealed through the various comments from the authority and clauses in the rule. “No,no, no... this is not a job a woman can do...it requires a lot of strength...of mind and body” (18) and the rules state “Qualification: Applicant should be an adult, over five feet four inches tall. Only males need apply” (57). The prevailing tradition and ways of the society is evident through the above statement. During this course, the largest women’s organization in the country comes for rescuing and ensuring the job for her. But, they are not able to understand the nuances of Chetna’s life as the problems and predicaments of doubly marginalized women are different from upper class women.

She takes the responsibility of life her own. Her life is journey through self-realization that creates her identity as a 'free woman' with the independent will.

The novel gives the account of different sexual harassments and death of women far and near Sonagachi. Sircar Mama, who is fond of Chetna is a serial rapist killer murdered several women and girls. And the continuing idolized oppression of women is posted in Meera's words as "Man's love is different from woman's. A man can love only the woman who gives him pleasure. But a woman capable of loving evens those who hurt her." (110)

Chetna discloses the continuing suppression of women in history and she declares, "It is not women who fear history; it is history that fears women. That's why there are so few of them in it. My place in it was assured only if I managed to put the noose around Jatindranath Banerjee's neck and died in a flawlessly executed hanging" (189). She wants to mark herself in history as a rebellion against centuries of oppression. Chetna, the embodiment of sheer woman power transgresses all the obstructions and proclaims that "I, Chetna Grddha Mullick, the symbol of strength and self respect of all women in India and the whole world" (157).

Finally, Chetna hangs Jatindranath Banerjee who has raped and killed a thirteen year old girl as the official hangwoman of India, without any assistance from her Baba. Through this act, she has knocked down the subjugation and oppression towards women in the male centered universe.

#### **4.3 Crossroads in *Ancient Promises***

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* depicts a tradition bound Indian society where women sacrifice their life under different patriarchal idolized institutions like marriage, family, religion and so on. The novel presents women characters as the upholders of the tradition, which make their painful.

As in the other two novels, *Ancient Promises* presents three generations of women characters that live their life differently. The patriarchal upbringing of the Maraar household which privileged men over women can be seen on the

arrangement of household in the dining room. "... Men first in the dining room, children alongside at the kitchen table, then the women, the drivers and servants and finally, after she'd fed everybody else, the old Ammumma" (Misra 83).

One among the first generation woman, the woman who serves in Maraar house is the mother of Janu's mother-in-law. The ongoing suffering of the woman can be seen through the stories of Saramma and she works in the house like a slave from the dawn to dusk. The suppression of aged women is an aspect that is different from the other two novels. She is sacrificial figure and devoted mother who is oppressed by her own daughter.

In addition, the novel exposes "Kerala's paradoxical love of literacy without liberation" (Misra173). The predicament of women in household can be traced through the stories of Saramma and Suma Chechi. Saramma, a neighbor of ammumma's house used to go to the work in the daytime, wash clothes of the whole family in the night, and clear the domestic work like sweeping, wiping and other household duties in between. After that she has to send her children to school packing their books, giving them breakfast and providing them lunch. Whereas, Suma is a victim of domestic violence. "Suma Chechi put up with her beatings about twice a month, turning up at the family functions looking tired and defeated but married" (238).

Janu is the protagonist of the novel who has faced great trajectories on dedicating herself to the wishes of her family. In spite of being educated, she was thrown in to the arranged marriage giving up her love for Arjun. More than a marriage it is an alliance between two families. "It was Maraar's I had married, not Suresh" (Misra 87). The relationship between Suresh and Janu is not warm as he was living in his own world of business with his own parents. Janu is considered to be a mere sexual object rather than a partner. He denied the individuality of Janu and never made an effort to understand her situations. "He had never helped me create a life for myself, he had never explained to me what his business was all about, he had never looked across a crowded room at me to signal that a certain partnership

existed between us” (248). There is an underlying “Incompatibility” between them. Moreover, “Love didn’t seem to play much of a part” (87).

Janu’s lost love; failed marriage and catastrophe in motherhood have created enduring oppression in her life. The enduring oppression of women in marriage is foreshadowed by the wedding rituals of Janu. Janu is more familiarized with the feet of the man than his face during the occasion of the marriage ceremony as a woman is not supposed to be arrogant in her looks. Also, this practice symbolize women’s life is going to be at the foot of the husband and his family. The family to which Janu is getting married is Maraars, the proud and traditional Maraar’s. Even though Maraars’s doesn’t ask for dowry, Janu’s family provides her with as much as gold they can. When she comes to the house of Maraar’s, they look at the ornamental assets, she has brought home and found that it is not up to what they have given to their daughter Sati. Also, Janu is always criticized for her modern ways from Delhi. Janu is not given the similar consideration that is given to other women in the family.

She has tried her best to cop up with Maraar ways of life while sacrificing her desires and passions. She says, “I’d given the marriage affair chance, no one could deny I’d tried my best, changing my whole personality to fit in with the Maraar’s” (121). Her role in the house is that of a passive woman. Her “marriage was as empty and undemanding” (132). Janu believes that the arrival of a child to their life can change things but it worsens the situation. The child born for them is mentally challenged and it adds her duty to be a good mother, wife and daughter-in-law. The predicament of Janu increases as Suresh does not help in the upbringing of Riya. It seems to be the responsibility of Janu to look after the child, even though she loves to do it. For Maraar’s, Riya is a girl and mentally challenged child, that would reduce their interest and responsibility on her. For them, the child is merely ‘inconvenient’.

Janu asserts herself through the independent upbringing of Riya. Janu takes her to the special school while teaching in the same school. Along with this, she completes her Bachelors and Masters degree in English. She feels the need for becoming independent and to make a better future for her neglected child. She plans to migrate to America so that it would allow better opportunities to Riya and that make

her distanced from Maraar's. This is a time of self-realization for her, from where she searches for identity.

The quest for identity and space can be traced throughout the novel. Her decision for migrating to Abroad is a part of her quest for identity and from the realization of her potentials. She thinks that abroad is different from India as, "Women could live on their own and not be thought of as scarlet women or a member of some strange, unfortunate breed" (146). For this, she clears the scholarship interview to pursue the higher studies. This is "to escape a marriage that wasn't terribly bad one but wasn't very good either" (Misra170).

As a part of the interview, Janu leaves to Delhi. She visits Leena's house, where she meets Arjun and refreshes her passions. On returning from Delhi after the interview, she asks divorce from Suresh. "With every word I uttered I knew I was taking one more unreturnable step into the territory previously trodden only by very foolish or very bad women" (233). This creates legal issues between Suresh and Janu, the Marrar's proclaim her to be mad and get treated by their family daughters. "The episode in the mental hospital had made it clear that there was now no other road to take" (235). Her mother takes her forcibly to their home and her mother also goes along with her to file a divorce petition. As revenge, Maraar's tries to tar her reputation.

The whispers were becoming sibilant, with a sparkling of razor-sharp words, aimed to sting and stab...adulteress...shameless...promiscuous...materialistic hussy...sleeping around...ex-lovers...each word sent a new spear into my mother's heart. (Misra 251)

Janu's comes out of the veils of the norms of the society and lives life with Arjun. Even after that, she has gone for a legal fight for Riya, whom Suresh has taken forcibly on the quarrel between Janu and him. He leaves Riya when he is getting married to another woman. Thus, Janu is a character that surpasses all the predicaments after her self-realization that established her livable life varied from suffering. The novel ends with an optimistic hope, "Together, in their small noisy

diesel chariot, they carried us into the falling dusk. Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin” (305).

Even though, the problems and predicaments of women characters in the three novels set in different cultures across India, varied in time, space and class varies in their intensities, they foregrounds the over powering patriarchal system that regulates the performance of women. The women characters like Mayamma, Sita, Uma. Gauri, Ma, Kakima, Devi, Chetna and Janu undergo oppression within the institutions of family, religion and marriage. Although, Chetna do not submit to marriage system, she faces many problems out of the notion that women are the commodity that have to be sold in marriage. The protagonist of the three novels and Sita, mother of Devi comes out of the veils of patriarchy and establishes their identity. The self-realization and identity of the women characters is similar what to Sarala Devi asserts in her work *The Rights of Women*.

Today, the inner self of the woman aspires to freedom. She is determined to overcome all the obstacles that stand in the way of liberation. The continued closing in on her inner self can never be accepted. This has become intolerable, especially now. And because it is unbearable now, there is a fire of rebellion. (Devi 157)

In short, the three women protagonist surpasses all the subjugations and rises above the oppressions and establishes their identity.

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## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Feminist movements across the globe are a sociopolitical reality that has flourished over an epoch through different channels as an awakening against the oppression of women. Feminism in India is developed as a result of its indigenous struggles as well as of many imitations, assimilations, and resistance. The growth of feminism in India is a multi-faceted trajectory rather than a linear progression that realized the peculiar existence of Indian women.

This study entitled “Women at Crossroads in Indian fiction: A Study of The Thousand Faces of Night, Hangwoman, and Ancient Promises examines the problems, predicaments and individual resistance of three generations of Indian women varied in time, space, caste-class sections, and outlooks. These novels are specially chosen as their portrayal of women characters, in its own unique ways; reveal the crossroads of women in Indian fiction.

The chapter titled ‘Crossroads of Tradition, Modernity, and Individuality’ analysed the predicament of Indian women placed between the contradictory notions of tradition, modernity and individuality based on the three novels Hangwoman, The Thousand Faces of Night and Ancient Promises. The first generation women character depicted in the three novels like Grandmother, Thakuma, and Ammumma appear to be strong and find their own space in the life. And, the second generation women characters like Sita, Mayamma, Gauri, Ma, and Kakima are portrayed as submissive, sacrificial and passive woman surrender to the victimization of traditional notions of marriage, family and motherhood. Moreover, the other characters like Parvatamma and Trilokya Debi assert their individuality and become the creators of their own destiny rather than submissive to the patriarchal system. Indifference, Janu’s Mother in law in Ancient Promises seems to be standing out like a matriarch in the patriarchy, conditioned by traditional norms of the society. Whereas, the protagonists, as well as the third generation women in the novels. Devi, Chetna, and

Janu have suffered under the clash between traditional values and modern ideas. But, they surpass all the predicaments through individual resistance.

The comparative and contrastive analysis of three generations of women characters varied in time, caste, class and culture expose the various ways through which women live their lives. The three novels provide insights into the split consciousness of women caught between the contradictory notions of tradition, modernity, and individuality. Although different generations of women appear to be dissimilar to each other, they are in a pathway of evolutionary process accommodating the intricacies of the transforming culture.

The first generation women characters including grandmother, Thakuma and Ammumma are proud carriers of culture and traditions. These three characters are aged, widowed and have certain authority over other women in the family. The traces of the harsh experiences of the first generation women are absent in the narrations. The grandmothers are depicted as the mouthpieces of tradition and culture. At the same time, widowhood empowers and abates them. Even though, these are the fictions written almost during the same period, presenting three generations of women, the predicament of women are different due to varied cultural experience and geographical setting. The Grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a strong-willed woman with her own perspective of life. She protests against the women's oppressions traced back from epic times through her twisted stories rather than revolting against it. And in *Hangwoman*, Thakuma stands as the spokesperson of the family's heritage, Kolkata's history and myths about women. She is the carrier of patriarchal values, even though she wants to assert the space of women in her family's lineage. She is an instrument of patriarchy which defines the role of women in relation to men. Meanwhile, Ammumma in *The Ancient Promises* is an educated woman, who tries to educate the younger generation and stands with women who are subjugated in the patriarchal world. For the first generation women characters, widowhood is a way to find their space which may be denied in the marital life. They try to exert their power over women and children, who might be once suppressed by their husbands and family.

Whereas, the second generation women characters like Sita, Mayamma, Ma, Kakima and Janu's mother are depicted as in conflict between tradition and modernity. They impound themselves to the traditional gender roles of women as passive, sacrificial and subservient. Also, individuality is undermined by the familial preferences. Sita's act of giving up Veena, Mayamma's and Ma's submission to domestic violence, Kakima's victimization into patriarchal norms and Janu's mother's restrictions after her husband's death are instincts of institutional suppressions that restricts their individuality. In contradiction, the other second generation women like Parvatamma and Trilokya Debi emphasize their individuality and explores a liveable life different from the rest. Also, Janu's mother-in-law appears to act as a negotiator of patriarchal values. Moreover, the characters in the novel remind that how patriarchy works in society through different agencies rather than from a man in the family.

Likewise, the third generation women over and above the protagonists of the novels, Devi, Chetna, Janu fights against the conventions and tries to assert the individuality. The lives of these characters appear to be in conflict between tradition and modernity. Although the three characters belong to different classes and castes of Indian society, they fight with the oppressive traditions that entangle women. By breaking the stereotypes and nullifying the patriarchal notions of womanhood, they surpass the problems and predicaments through individual resistance.

Another Chapter, 'Crossroads of Myths, Lore and Customs' foregrounds the marginalized stories and customs of Indian women that are suppressed in the mainstream as well stresses the deviant women characters in myths and lores. The mythical stories told by the grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night* are about Damayanti, Ganga, Gandhari, Amba and girl who married snake rather than glorified Sita or Savitri. And this shows how certain stories in Indian tradition are rewarded and others are undermined. Whereas, the myths and lores in the *Hangwoman* told by Thakuma are dealing with both subverted and subjugated women. In *Difference*, the novel *Ancient Promises* does not deal with much of myths, but it looks at the taboos and customs that marginalize women inside and outside their homes.

The mythical stories told by the grandmother of Devi are mostly the subverted stories of womanhood that distorts the idolized notions of women in epics. The narration of myths in the novel foregrounds the development of women characters from the epic period to the contemporary world. The mythical story of Damayanti refers to the women's freedom to choose her life partner prevailed in the epic periods. Moreover, Gandhari's act of tying red clothes over her eyes is seen mostly as an act of self sacrifice. But, the grandmother presents another perspective that Gandhari has done under her rage. Likewise, the Amba's story reveals the determination, aggression and rebellion of a woman. In addition, the story of Goddess Ganga shows women's rejection of motherhood different from the sacrificial stories like that of 'the girl who married the snake'. The Grandmother's stories provide 'a thousand faces of women'. Contrastively, the stories of Baba intend to make a virtuous woman who fits into the household. This specifies the role of patriarchy in framing the women simply as daughter, wife, and mother.

Similarly, Thakuma avers a lot of stories about the women in history and myths even though the history is mostly occupied by men. Her stories provide the examples of women varied from submissiveness to rebellion. The story of Devi Sati mentioned in *Hangwoman* is similar to that Gandhari rendered in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Both can be interpreted as an act of sacrifice or either as out of rage. Also, she delivers historical stories of women that either restricts or sanctions women's rebellion. The overwhelming of patriarchal conditioning can be understood in Thakuma's stories. The novel *Ancient Promises* dwells on certain socio-cultural traditions and practices rather than myths. It is found that rendering of the myths and lores greatly affects the life of women characters especially, the protagonists of the novel.

In addition, the chapter explores the socio-cultural practices and customs with respect to the geographical setting of the novels. The novels are set in the backdrop of Hindu traditions in India. The novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Hangwoman* and *Ancient Promises* are set in a Tamil Brahmin family; lower class executioner's family in Kolkata and middle class Nair family respectively. Hindu epics and customs

have great role in the formation of each women characters ranging from the first generation to the third generation. Also, the women characters in the novels vary from different strata's of society. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is set in a Tamil Brahmin family, who enjoys the privileges of an upper-class elite family. The 'Agraharam', US education of Devi, Sita's playing of Veena and Parvatiamma's search for God denying the familial roles are the part of their privileges. Mayamma and Gauri are the deprived sections of the society who confronts a lot of problems than the other women in the novel.

Meanwhile, the novel *Hangwoman* is set on the backdrop of Sonagachi and Kolkata with all its smells and fumes. Chetna belongs to an executioner's family, who are the underprivileged and the marginalised sections of the society. Hanging people is considered as a ritually impure task ought to lower caste community. The poverty is a great issue in Chetna's family, which intensifies the effect of the situation. Women are dually oppressed. The Mullick's family praises Goddess like Kali and Durga, rather than Saraswati and Sita as it is entwined to their traditions. But, it is ironical that women they admire are like Sita and Savitri. The characters like Thakuma, Ma, Kakima and Chetna are entangled to the hardships of livelihood. The economic backwardness increases their dilemma. In addition, Trilokya Debi's life as a prostitute has traditional and cultural reinforcement as they are Agreveli's who descended from Apsara's. Also, the act of Kakima is a part of her quandary as a lower class woman.

The background of the novel *Ancient Promises* is a middle-class Kerala Nair tharawad. The novel gives the implications of undermined matrilineal system and literacy of Kerala. The women characters suffer within the patriarchal order of Kerala society, which privileges men over women in socio-economic areas. In contrast to the other novels, Ammumma is presented as an educated woman who tries to literate children in the village rather than transferring mythical stories. Still, she is a traditional woman character rather than a deviant. The institutional framework of marriage, family and religion regulates the performance of women characters. The characters of Ammumma, Janu's mother and Janu try their best into the social customs and practices of the society. The act of wearing the white sari, the notion of *kanya daan*

and menstrual restrictions on women are the taboos that marginalize women in multiple ways. This chapter concludes that the novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Hangwoman*, and *Ancient Promises* set on the backdrop of myths, lores and social customs play a great role in determining the predicament of women characters.

The next Chapter titled, 'Crossroads of Enduring oppression, Self-realization and Identity' renders the oppression and marginalisation of the women characters in the tradition bound male-dominated society. The life story of Mayamma, Sita, Uma, Devi, Gauri, Ma, Kakima, Niharika, Chetna and Janu are the allegories of enduring oppression, out of which the characters like Sita, Devi, Chetna and Janu comes out of self-realization and establishes their identity. The problems and predicaments of each character in the corresponding novels are different as they belong to the varied class, caste, place and time. But, most of the women suffer under the patriarchal domination prevailing in the Indian society although it varies in their intensities. The institutions like marriage, family and religion regulate the gender roles for women. Moreover, the protagonists of the three novels, Devi, Chetna and Janu trespass the conventional orthodoxy through self realisation and quest for identity.

Thus, the analysis of the novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Hangwoman* and *Ancient Promises* suggests that women are at the crossroads of Indian fiction.

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