



Rising Hope: Optimistic Female Characters in the Novels of Githa Hariharan

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at analyzing the hope cultivated by the female characters in the novels Githa Hariharan. Githa Hariharan is well acclaimed as a champion writer for the weaker section of the society. In her three novels, namely *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories*, she portrays the sufferings of female characters from various strata of society, who stand as the representatives for their gender. Even though she makes her female characters to undergo sufferings, none of the characters withdrew themselves from fighting hardships with their grit and determination. The study of these characters under the light of Hope Circuit theory propagated by Martin Seligman, an American psychologist, would provide the deeper level of understanding of their optimistic outlook towards life. Martin Seligman is well known for his path breaking concept of positive psychology, which influenced the later part of the twentieth century psychologists. The application of Martin Seligman's theory throws a light on the never dying attitude of the female characters and highlights how they manage to sustain themselves with the positive energy they possess innately.

Keywords: hope, sufferings, fighting attitude, grit and determination, optimistic outlook

1. INTRODUCTION

Githa Hariharan, in her novels, deals with the anomalies present in the contemporary society. She is acclaimed for her voice for the marginalized people in the society. When it comes to the subject of depicting the sufferings of the Indian women, she excels in her representation. Githa Hariharan has created memorable characters like Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Meena in *In Times of Siege* and Yasmin in *Fugitive Histories*. The portrayal of these characters stands as a testimony for other women in the society to fight their hardships positively. Hariharan has put all the characters in to an array of sufferings, but none of the characters think about suicide to end their pathetic living. On the other hand, they rise against their trails by finding some means and prove themselves as real heroines of the novels. Moreover, these female characters over shadow their counter part with their strong hope to survive.

This paper aims at a deep analysis of the female characters with the elements of positive psychology and to initiate the profound understanding of the human mind. Positive psychology declares that human minds innately long for happy moments to charge themselves with positive energy. Even though the negative incidents in human life eclipse the positivity of the human psyche, it waits for the right moment to rise against its oddities. Martin Seligman in his path breaking book, *The Hope Circuit* declares as follows:

Happiness in a human life consists of achieving worthwhile pursuits: career accomplishment, friendship, freedom from disease and pain, material comfort, civic spirit, beauty, education, love, knowledge, and good conscience. (273)

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2. POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, was disappointed with the fact that several researches in 1960's and 70's directed towards studying negativity of the human mind namely mental illness, trauma, abnormality, suffering and pain. He felt that the shift had to occur in the minds of psychologists from studying the illness of the human mind, to finding new means of triggering the positivity or positive emotion in to the human mind. He proclaimed that the future psychology should focus on positivity rather than trying to decipher the human mind and branding it as abnormal, mental illness etc. He invited researchers to engage themselves in the research which aims at initiating positivity in the human minds and in turn constructing the future generation positively.

Seligman propounded a new theory PERMA model, to facilitate the mind of the people towards optimism. He asserted that positivity is the state of mind and that can be achieved by constant training and practice. "PERMA" is an acronym for the five facets of well-being according to Seligman namely positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment / achievement. Seligman feels elated with his theory of PERMA model, as it gives the concrete parameters to evaluate the wellbeing of human, thereby appraising the quality of hope possessed by them. Hence, Seligman hails his PERMA model as follows:

I rate my PERMA very high: on a one-to-ten scale, I rate my positive emotion a six, my engagement a ten, my relationships a six, my sense of meaning a ten, and my accomplishment a ten. In 1967, had I conceived of PERMA, all of my scores would have been much lower. I am optimistic and usually filled with hope about the future. (The Hope Circuit 387)

Application of PERMA model on the female characters of Githa Hariharan gives a fresh interpretation of their action. As Seligman highlights in his Hope Circuit theory, the woman characters keep adapting several means to relieve themselves from their sufferings.

3. DEVI IN *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

Devi, the protagonist, is in search of well being right from the beginning of the novel. She is a fantasy driven girl, whose mind is possessed with the mythical stories narrated by her grandmother during her childhood. Since her childhood has been nurtured with the mythical figures, she identifies herself with the strong women characters and she tells to herself many times that a prince would come to take her as his love. She returns from US after her studies, as a confident young girl to face the challenges of the life. Even when she is asked to choose her life partner from the available prospective bridegrooms, she values the frankness of Mahesh and prefers him as her life partner. These incidents show Devi as a person filled with positive emotion. Seligman insisted the significant role of positive emotion in building the life hopefully as follows:

Positive emotion is important, not just because it is pleasant in its own right, but because it causes much better commerce with the world. Developing more positive emotion in our lives will build friendship, love, better physical health, and greater achievement. (*Authentic Happiness* 54)

All through the novel, she establishes her mental mettle by maintaining the positive emotion, even in her worst times and she surfaces herself from any given hardship. Even towards the end of the novel, when she is deprived by Gopal and completely lost in the whirl of misfortune, she has not entertained any negative emotion to end her life. Devi accepts the reality and decides to wait for the bright days to come.

4. MEENA IN *IN TIMES OF SIEGE*

The novel, *In Times of Siege*, starts with the arrival of Meena to Shiv's house and ends with her departure. The association of Meena with Shiv during his tough time is so crucial. She assists him in maintaining the track of events and reminds and guides him on action plans at the right moments. Meena is a sociology student of KNU, who is working on her thesis on the pathetic status of women during anti-Sikh riot, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. She is a bold and courageous girl who involves herself in various social welfare activities, along with her college friends. Her topic of research and her involvement in social activities exhibit her concern towards the society and her efforts to add meaning to her life through the social cause. She is a girl of high positive emotion and that is instilled in the mind of Shiv, whenever he is confused with his course of action. Meena stands as an example of Seligman's concept on positive emotion gained through experience. The exposure of Meena in social activities has given her the much needed positive emotion to support Shiv. Seligman explains the merit of positive emotion which is acquired through experience as follows:

Experiences that induce positive emotion cause negative emotion to dissipate rapidly. The strengths and virtues, as we will see, function to buffer against misfortune and against the psychological disorders, and they may be the key to building resilience. The best therapists do not merely heal damage; they help people identify and build their strengths and their virtues. (*Authentic Happiness* 12)

Actually she has been brought by Shiv to get her healed of her injured leg, but the deep analysis of the novel would portray that it is Meena, who acts as a moral energy to Shiv to face his challenges. She exhibits her brilliance in guessing the man behind the controversy, even before Shiv had any clue of the culprit. Meena is very good at valuing relationships. It is proven from the fact that she has been trusted and valued by friends and the concern which she expresses towards Shiv. As she values relationships, she tries all the possible ways to make her life meaningful. Her role in social activities, helping her friends, standing beside Shiv for good cause and struggling hard to withhold truth in the society project her strong positive emotion and love for humanity in general. She assumes the role of good Samaritan even when her leg is hurt badly.

Meena displays her shrewdness in saving Shiv from the mounting protest. Although Shiv exhibits his determination to stand for truth, it is Meena to a great extent supports Shiv and finally accomplished her goal of gathering public and academicians in favour of Shiv. When the protest against Shiv's

controversial lesson gains momentum, she plans to counter attack the protest by taking the issue to the general public, students and other academicians. She executes her plan with the help of Amar and her other friends. She is able to reach the general public, students and academicians and presents the real fact of the controversy, which triggered their emotion and made them to come to the streets in support of Shiv. It is her efforts which nullified the protest against Shiv. When Seligman explains the significance of happiness and accomplishment in life, he says "Happiness in a human life consists of achieving worthwhile pursuits: career accomplishment, friendship, freedom from disease and pain, material comfort, civic spirit, beauty, education, love, knowledge, and good conscience" (*The Hope Circuit* 273). The accomplishment of Meena carries the essence of Seligman's words. Her goal and her accomplishment are not self centered and she does everything for a social cause.

5. YASMIN IN *FUGITIVE HISTORIES*

Yasmin represents young generation of the victimized Muslim family. As a school going girl, she is shocked and confused with the things happening around her in the name of communal riot. She is perplexed, when her mother talks to her about the danger that has surrounded them and her advice on safety and security. In spite of witnessing the social evils beyond her age, she does not leave her hope towards her life and it is manifested in all her actions. As any child will have a craze towards film stars, she is also attracted towards Shabana Azmi and she believes that she will come as a saviour to relieve her from miseries. Even in their misery, she maintains a positive emotion.

She is so much affected by the cruel incidents of the riot and as her mother warned her to be watchful, while going and returning from school, she normally takes the main route to school even though it is long and she never turns aside or speak to anyone on her way. The cruelty of her situation is explained by Githa Hariharan, when she gives explanation for the word careful. She narrates as follows:

Being careful means avoiding an empty road but also a crowd. It means not going where it's dark or where there may be policemen. It means running, hiding, keeping her racing heart quiet and still because there's someone after her and he may hear it. Someone, or many someones. They may have tilaks on their foreheads, trishuls in their hands. Trishuls, or swords, pipes, rods, hockey sticks. Anything that can hit or cut. (Fugitive Histories 123)

Eventhough she is surrounded by threats around as a girl and moreover a Muslim girl, she is constantly motivated and filled with positive thoughts by her mother. As her brother is missing permanently after riot, she feels it is her duty to take care of her parents and raise the status of their family. Madhvi Parashar appreciated the confidence and commitment of Yasmin as, "Yasmin, a victim of Gujarat riots, symbolizes thousands of women who are trying to learn to live after losing the male relatives of their family. Though all the aspects of culture and society try to make her feel inferior, she is trying to find her niche professionally"(90). She values her relation with her parents and friends and strives hard to add meaning to her existence by being responsible to her parents. She fixes clearing her board exams and to get higher education as her goal and she finally accomplishes it by her patience and dedication.

6. CONCLUSION

The above discussion has exhibited the undying spirit of the female characters of Githa Hariharan and it has also provided a comprehensive analysis of the leading female characters in her three novels, namely Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Meena in *In Times of Siege* and Yasmin in *Fugitive Histories*. By creating the invincible heroines, Githa Hariharan has attempted to highlight the importance of holding the crucial positive element called hope in life. She proclaims to her women community that fighting against the complexities in life would fetch them more accomplishments in life than just lamenting over the failures and hardships.

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