

*The Thousand Faces of Night:*  
A Counter-Narrative of Bleeding Womanhood  
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I

We can find in most arguments on menstruation reference to defilement.<sup>1</sup> In *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, for example, Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi argue that there is a link between women's subordination and the patriarchal caste hierarchy, due to the "pollution" of menstruation: "To the Brahmin, childbirth, sexuality and menstruation were all sources of pollution . . ." (69). Louise Lander, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo and Margrit Shildrick maintain that women's corporeality becomes a cultural product closely related to their low social status, and according to Lander menstruation is seen in negative ways, as a shame, curse, or defilement in many cultures (Lander Preface; Grosz 205–06; Bordo 16–17; Shildrick 14–17).

Everybody, of course, is influenced by mainstream culture in some ways, but individual women may internalize feminine roles in different ways, or rebel against them differently. Although the dominant culture tries to dictate a normative female body, some literary texts have come to offer compelling counter-narratives. We find the representation of menstruating female bodies in such literary works as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Ichiyo Higuchi's "Growing Up" (1895–96), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), Nawal E. Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988), and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). In each of these the protagonist experiences alienation from her own body. This is, of course, a central issue for feminism, but those feminists who have neglected the corporeality of menstruation as a source of oppression for women as well as those who have celebrated the female body as a source of power have tended to focus on the reproductive body, not on the non-reproductive body. Here I want to discuss how Hariharan subtly complicates such traditional feminist positions

by focusing on the non-reproductive female body. She was preceded in this in some ways by Higuchi, whose “Growing Up” is a striking early example of a menarche narrative “figured as the coming of a self-chosen sexual maturity” instead of as “the signal of immanent reproductive capacities” (Grosz 205).<sup>2</sup> At first, Hariharan’s representation of female bodies in *The Thousand Faces of Night* focuses in a traditional way on how each female character suffers from traumatic humiliation, guilt, and alienation from her own body, processes which originate in menarche, but through these representations, I think, she not only exposes how women are suppressed but also creates a narrative of womanhood quite different from ones based on the woman=mother ideology.

## II

Hariharan creates a narrative that shifts the ideology of womanhood starting with menarche, which is tacitly assumed to be celebrated only because it means future motherhood, and thus means nothing for barren women. This work mainly consists of first-person narratives by Devi in parts 1 and 2, another first-person narrative of a long-suffering wife and mother, Mayamma (a housekeeper of Devi’s husband), and some third-person narratives in part 3. Devi and Mayamma are quite different in terms of caste, education, age, and marital situation; however, they share the plight of barrenness, for which they have been forced to feel worthless and useless. The two women communicate, sympathize, and support each other, thus breaking “the proverbial silence” on the issue among women in Indian society (Desai 192; Sirohi 119).

Devi has a secret life, her own imaginary world in which she becomes a woman warrior, a heroine different from the lonely, indecisive, and passive woman she is in daily life. Her longing creates a day-dream vision in which “a voice” leads her to a dizzy world in which a mountain woman, her new benefactor, trains her to become an incarnation of Durga, a fierce goddess, but one who also bears a woodland youth strong sons and daughters. So she is not only a lioness-like fighter, but also a woman with a womanly body, and she has a mellowness that makes her far-sighted and perceptive. This is an androgynous dream for a woman for whom self-fulfillment is a greedy sin, given the caring

wife-mother role which is expected of her. However, in real life Devi is long suffering from a sense of worthlessness because of her barrenness; she feels a “yawning emptiness” (68) in a married life of loneliness and boredom. Barrenness is a key term for Hariharan connected to the suppressed rage of women as bleeding bodies.

Mothers of sons who can preside in the rituals indispensable to Hindus are highly respected in Indian society; however, an unavoidable physiological condition for motherhood, menstruation and the blood of delivery are paradoxically considered contagiously defiled and dangerous. The dialogues between Devi, a newly married innocent wife and Mayamma in the Prelude show how Mayamma survived her long-suffering life as a wife and mother through her bleeding body in Hariharan’s own style full of comical pathos. To Devi’s question about “why Mayamma had put up with her life, she laughed till the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks” (Preface I). As she tells her story, she teases Devi about her childishness: “When I lost my first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear, I screamed, for the only time in my life. Why?. . . She [my mother-in-law] slapped my cheeks hard. . . Her fists pummeled my breasts and my still swollen stomach till they had to pull her off my cowering, bleeding body. She shouted, in a rage mixed with fear, “The barren witch has killed my grandson” (Prelude I-II). Mayamma has failed to reproduce a son, an heir necessary to sustain the patriarchal system. Mayamma herself does not doubt this system, nor does she resist it, as Devi, another childless wife, will come to do. Mayamma finally breaks a “proverbial” silence through her scream, “Why?”, while Devi has asked her grandmother, a storyteller of childhood fables, “Why?” thousands of times. Though she is told to be careful by Mayamma when she next asks a question, she promptly asks Mahesh, her husband, a taboo question, “Why do you want a baby?” (87).

Mayamma’s painful story of her survival is told repeatedly. After Devi leaves her husband, Mayamma’s memory goes back to her own marriage. One day, when Mayamma is hanging her new sari to dry, her mother-in-law mocks, “What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch?” and “she pulled up my [Mayamma’s] 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” (113). Mayamma, we learn, was married off at age 12 after her “blood flowed freely” and she became “a woman” (115). Her mother-in-law, being unable to “check Mayamma’s insides . . . had to content herself with the astrologer’s promise that Mayamma would bear her many strong grandsons” (80). She watches Mayamma’s “slim waist intently for the first year,” and in the second year she breaks into complaints (80). Her mother-in-law’s abuse is habitual throughout Mayamma’s married life. She forces Mayamma to fast every other day and to do penance to change the evil course of her horoscope. “Mayamma welcomed her penance like an old friend” and did everything she could do: she woke up at four in the morning, walked to the pond, prayed and “dipped herself again and again in the pure coldness” (80). One day the goddess she has prayed to blesses her womb and joy rushes through her “blood” (122). However, then “the blood came, too soon, too soon. . . . He [the new village doctor] 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” (122). This scene, beginning with joy in the blood and ending with tragic bleeding, is inscribed in Hariharan’s own style, combining strangely jaunty rhythms and concise diction.

Mayamma’s whole body is thus reduced to a womb, something which is celebrated if it can reproduce sons and cursed if it cannot in a society where a woman’s value mainly depends on her reproductive ability. From the viewpoint of her mother-in-law, who internalizes this patriarchal Indian culture, Mayamma is a dangerous witch, a killer of her grandson. The village doctor also suggests that barrenness results from one’s sins in a previous life. Devi’s experience with the doctors at a modern fertility clinic is equally bleak, for they “bristle with impatience,” see her as “a stupid woman who couldn’t even get pregnant, the easiest of accidents” and seem to say, “Look at the obedient, dutiful wives around you” (91). Thus we see how providers of medical care do not really care, for they share the ideology of womanhood as a matter of reproductive capacity. Furthermore, we see how barrenness connotes sin, danger, disobedience, stupidity and guilt in a barren, revolting womb. The mother-in-law’s

verbal assault makes Mayamma feel guilty, worthless and desperate to such a degree that she imagines her “womb slips down, sagging with the weight of my greed for motherhood,” and she puts her hand up, pulls and tears it out and “throws it on the garbage heap to rot” (122–23). Mayamma’s self-tormenting day-dream is generated from her suppressed rage and estrangement from her own uncontrollable body.

For her part, Devi, in her sterility, sense of worthlessness, and loneliness, imagines that the “sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above” her neck for years, “would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across” her neck, and let “blood gush” (54). Her education, an MA earned in the United States, does not help her to be a good wife. Her father-in-law, on whom she totally depends in a home from which her husband is often away on business, tells her that the way for a woman to reach heaven is to serve her husband. Her husband, who is indifferent to love but wants sons, rejects her desire for a career and her intellectual interest in Sanskrit texts. His quick gaze appraises her as “all bones and flat stomach” (86) after he returns from long business trips. His gaze and his words about pregnancy make her see herself as a blurred object with a stubborn womb: “The focus gets softer and softer, till everything dissolves into nothingness, everything but my stubborn, unrelenting womb” (93). Mahesh finds a doctor, who “will set right, with sterilized instruments, the rebellious organ, the straying tubes inside me” (89). Devi says, “I will leave the clinic with my parts glued together, whole, mended, an efficient receptacle for motherhood” (89). Here we can see Hariharan’s biting sarcasm about a scientific ideology that conspires with the gender system to reduce women to their reproductive ability. Scientists gaze in a way that dissects a human body into parts to be examined and mended. And some women willy-nilly come to incorporate this view. Even her late grandmother, a teller of fables about womanhood, and her capable mother, for whom Devi has a strong attachment, but whose “stifling and all-pervasive” love gives her “a nameless dread” (7), expect Devi to be a good wife and mother of sons, pureblooded Brahmins.

However, as Devi secretly changes the plots of her grandmother’s stories, she begins to assume a defiant attitude toward the traditional role of women, as evidenced by her asking her husband the taboo question,

“Why do you want a baby?” (87). Nevertheless, she begins to make desperate penance for her unborn son, following Mayamma’s advice. She sits day after day in a prayer room in front of brass and stone images of gods, who seem to dance round and round in a frenzy, chanting stories of sacrificial wives, and whose maniac rituals intrude into her dreams night after night. Mayamma, Annapurna, Parvatiamma, the maidservant Gauri, Devi’s cousin Uma, her grandmother, and the transgendered Amba whiz past, chanting stories of revenge. Out of these fragmented scenarios and other stories running in her head, she chooses one and leaves home on a journey with Gopal, a singer of ragas. She follows Parvatiamma, her mother-in-law, who has left her husband and violated “the law of threshold” (Lal 12) which restricts women within the boundaries of home. With this step, Devi is not a passive rebel any more.

Meanwhile, we need to recall that Sita, Devi’s mother, had also suffered a sacrificial married life. She early showed a talent for the veena, a string instrument, and was absorbed in playing it. However, doomsday soon comes. Her father-in-law is furious at not finding a thing he needs in his prayer room: “Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (30). Thus she has to give up the music she loves to become “a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised” (30), her grudge buried in the sacrificial altar of marriage. But she is not passive: “Sita . . . reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of their wooden base” (30). She answers her father-in-law in a “stinging whisper, ‘Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in-law’” without any word of protest, though her broken veena is “a discordant twang of protest” (30). This story is retold in part III, where we learn that “She tore the strings off the wooden base, and let the blood dry on her fingers to remind herself of her chosen path on the first difficult days of abstinence” (103).

Another sacrificial story about Sita’s marriage occurs in a midnight kitchen. Her husband is shocked to see Sita “ravenously eating the chapattis left over from dinner” (103), and he realizes that she has not had any rice; in other words, “Marriage had meant that Sita would have to learn to eat dry chapattis, which refused to go down the throat like sticky, wet balls of mashed rice” (103). She has made sacrifices without any com-

plaints to earn her husband's "unswerving loyalty" (103) to reach a goal, ideal wifehood. However, her body exposes her hidden desire behind her mask. We see in her a fierce conflict between her stubborn abstinence (her obsession about being a dutiful wife) and her desire for music. Her self-sacrificial pride as a dutiful wife and her suppressed grudge tell the tale of her marriage, which corresponds to Gandhari's story of "blind suffering in *Mahabharata*" (29). At her wedding, Gandhari finds that her husband is in fact literally blind, and without a word she tears off a piece of her thick red skirt and ties it tightly over her own eyes. Gandhari sacrifices her eyesight in this way to show her loyalty to her husband, yet Gandhari's anger seems to Devi to be "wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to me" (29). Sita's anger "could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life" (29). According to Devi's grandmother's interpretation, Sita is a modern version of Gandhari, a personified self-sacrifice, but Devi sees the cracks between Gandhari's and Sita's stories. Sita does not utter a word of protest to her father-in-law's reprimand, but her broken veena and the blood on her fingers speak volumes, volumes that will soon be attended to by her daughter. Her bloody fingers thus figure symbolically as a voice of protest.

Next I would like to examine how the story represents unavoidable corporeality of menstruation. Devi tells the story of her own first bleeding: "When I bled for the first time, my stomach cramped in knots of pain, I went in search of my grandmother" (87). However, Devi's grandmother never mentions bodily functions; she only lectures Devi on motherhood. "She ignored my body, the body vulnerable to sudden change. She dismissed the discomfort, my shyness in the face of a body that was now a stranger to me" (87–88). Being a woman does not mean a glorious future of motherhood for Devi; it only makes her feel alienated from her own body. Thus, the beginning of her menstrual period is connected to strangeness, a sense of disunion, discomfort, and shyness.

Mayamma is more directly humiliated mentally and abused physically when her menstruation begins in a temple: "The blood . . . flowed down my bare leg, hot and sticky, that afternoon when I prayed in the temple. . . . Go home, he [the priest] hissed, and before I could turn

around to run, his heavy hand marked my cheek with a stinging slap. . . . I had stained the purity of the temple with my gushing womanhood” (115). Womanhood for Mayamma is thus inescapably connected with this gushing blood of menstruation and of stillbirth bleeding, which both leave traumatic memories of pain, abuse, humiliation, deprivation, the loss of joy and pride, and the death of her first son. The stinging slap on her cheek by the priest, which crushes her pride in her womanhood, symbolizes punishment for the defilement with which a female body is burdened in a male-dominated society. Clearly this traumatic experience influences her subject formation as a woman; self-debasement is inscribed in her bleeding body.

### III

From this bleak background, Hariharan takes pains to project a sisterhood among women who share the same existential crisis, to offer a new bodily image different from the bleeding female bodies defiled, isolated, or exploited for reproduction. She shows desiring female “bodies met in blood and sweat” (77) through intoxicatingly erotic rituals. She presents diverse metaphorical mother-and-daughter narratives besides the real mother-and-daughter narrative between Devi and Sita, including the relationships between Devi and Parvatiamma, Mayamma and Parvatiamma, Devi and her grandmother, and Devi and Mayamma. And each woman’s story intersects, as do the legends and fables of many heroines and goddesses as narrated by Devi’s grandmother; the stories become narratives of friendship between women of different castes, generations, and educational backgrounds.

Many years after her first son is born dead, Mayamma bears a son. After this son dies, she comes to Parvatiamma with only a torn sari, and Parvatiamma gives her a home. From that day, Mayamma tells Devi, “Parvatiamma was my sister, my mother, my daughter” (82). Mayamma, a victim of domestic violence by her mother-in-law, her husband, and her son, all sustaining the patriarchal system, is supported by Parvatiamma, who chooses to leave her husband to seek God by herself and is thus labeled a fallen woman because she crosses “the threshold, the boundaries of home,” since for “women, a step over the bar is an

act of transgression" (Lal 12). Parvatiamma is doomed to be punished, but she also becomes a surrogate mother-in-law for Devi, her "guardian angel," a model of a rebel woman far different from Devi's mother, who has sacrificed her dream in order to be a good wife. When Parvatiamma leaves the house, Mayamma "felt destitute" as if her "mother had died again" (63). But Mayamma then finds she can live again, not only through Parvatiamma but "even through" Devi (136).

Long-suffering Mayamma supports Devi because she is also sterile and feels humiliated by busy gynecologists and her husband's gaze and because she finally decides to leave home like Parvatiamma. Devi's late grandmother had similarly given deserted wives and impoverished widows a warm refuge. Her grandmother is for Devi a beloved "old friend" who has left "a gift of the ultimate fantasy: a woman avenger" (39) as well as diverse moral fables out of which Devi herself will make her own stories of womanhood. Sita dedicates herself to the altar of marriage as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, but the sacrifice comes to nothing because of her widowhood. By contrast, Devi, at first an "obedient puppet" of her mother, begins to think of "her mother's years of unstinting devotion to the family" and understands her loneliness and deep, unrelenting pain and sees her life as efficient but empty (136). This sympathetic gaze suggests that "the possibility of our newly made friendship" (14), which Devi had expected just after she came back from the US, but which was betrayed, can be realized in a different way in the near future. She decides to meet Sita with "the unflinching look" (139) which she has rehearsed beforehand and offer her love to her in order to make a new beginning. Devi opens the gate and "quicken[s] her footsteps as she hear[s] the faint sounds of a veena, hesitant and child-like, inviting her into the house" (139). Sita had also seemed to make a new beginning before she gave up her beloved veena, replacing it with her daughter and living as a dominant mother, a socially accepted form of ambition for women. According to Krishna Sarbadhikary, "Devi reunites with 'the maternal feminine,' seeking to be cocooned in an even narrower space, not able to take any independent decision, content to be a survivor" (154). But I think Sita is now no longer a womb that cocoons her child but rather a child herself desiring her abandoned dream.

Hariharan suggests that Devi and Sita create the space between them to stand face to face in order to empower each other in the final scene.

The way these outcast women help and support each other through shared pain and humiliation, whether with the invisible ties between Devi and Parvatiamma, or with the ostensible reunion of Devi and Sita, creates the basis for a battle against abuse, a warm refuge that empowers them to challenge the myth of a self-denying ideal wife in traditional Hindu culture. All these barren or widowed women are united and form a network with other women through their own stories of bleeding bodies. Hariharan, however, like Bapsi Sidhawa, who also has a myth-making representational power in terms of sisterhood, refuses to let a woman's life be reduced to the idea of a communion of bleeding bodies. In both writers, the diversity of women is carefully delineated.

Let us note here the erotic bond in the ritual of blood between Devi and Annapurna, her cousin and playmate. Annapurna, with plump, round breasts and glistening hair, is "a goddess" (77) Devi secretly admires and for whom she has a thrall of passion. She is an active girl, and teases Devi for her fear of climbing trees. One day Devi tells her that "strangers sealed their new-found brotherhood with blood" (76), and Annapurna becomes eager to do this with Devi. They prick their little fingers with Amma's sewing needle, and they "joined wounds together" (76) with pain and excitement. However, Annapurna suddenly leaves while Devi is away because her mother is jealous of "the unrestrained web of passionate intimacy Annapurna wove around" (77) Devi. But she leaves an unforgettable memory of "mango-laden summer when bodies met in blood and sweat" (77). Thus is blood reconfigured as a sign not of victimized women but of women radiant with joy and love.

Subject formation based on the ideology of motherhood is so insidiously systematized that we may not notice how we divide women into "pregnant women of all shapes and sizes" (90) and barren women with "flat" stomachs, or into obedient women and those with a "rebellious organ" (89). But Hariharan's text impressively exposes this reality through its representations of bleeding female bodies. Her depiction of a

bleeding community allows for an endless multiplication of differences among women, but it is strategically powerful as an image of a communion in which women can share their painful or joyful experiences and understand their bodies, a communion that allows women to rebel against a suppressive system and to build on their new empowerment.

Hariharan exposes the suppressive structures by which women have been exploited, representing multifarious bleeding female bodies both in reality and in fables. This text thus transfigures the image of a defiled bleeding body, turning it into an image of a subversive sensual body, a body with angry eyes, and a body shared with other women. This appropriation and cooptation of the symbolism of bleeding takes its negative power from the oppressors and turns it into a vital source of communion.

Sita expects Devi to be a mother, to attain this ideal of womanhood, so she aims to pluck the buds of “a mutiny” (105), countering her “dreams of blood and . . . women turning into men” (106) and the “innocent sensuality” (105) of her intimacy with Annapurna. Devi’s deviation is striking, considering how she has been oriented toward only one ideal, that of traditional womanhood by all those around her. By showing how she is influenced by Mayamma and Parvatamma, and the stories of women whom her grandmother took care of as well as the fables told by her, Hariharan makes Devi’s struggles to challenge the traditional woman’s role a matter of seeking for “a story of her own” (137).

Devi’s struggle for her own story shows she is in the process of centering herself in order to act, which in fact she does. Devi’s story is created through her dialogues with Mayamma, her mother and grandmother, and her daydreams of heroines and goddesses, and these fluid exchanges urge her to rewrite her own story endlessly. The stories of Devi’s selfhood formation thus flow into this stream of diverse stories of women, mingle with them, and constitute a new form of mother-and-daughter fiction. Hariharan subtly shows the possibility of female subjectivity without reproducing a newly suppressed woman, “the other.” The subject position as a Brahmin wife allotted to Devi is thus replaced by her own story of womanhood, which in turn opens the way for other women to create their own redeeming narratives.

## Notes

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- 1 For a counterargument, see Yagi, who states that menstruation is considered fortunate in a village of Uttar Pradesh in India because it is connected with reproductive capability, fertility and sexual maturity in the matriarchal culture ("From a Girl" 70).
- 2 Catherine's initiation into her womanhood in *Wuthering Heights* is symbolically represented by her bleeding leg after a watchdog bites her when she tries to intrude into Thrushcross Grange, a symbolic space of initiation. She experiences her body as something alienated from her soul, and finally this alienation becomes a "shattered prison" (167) from which she desperately wishes to escape to attain the "glorious world beyond" (167) on her death bed. This is a seminal literary representation of a castrated female body in existential agony. She is excluded from her childhood home, Wuthering Heights, a symbolized Eden, hence "an exile," "an outcast," (130) doomed to wander on the moor like a ghost.

Annie in *Annie John* is an example of Catherine's spiritual progeny, also losing the world at the beginning of her womanhood. She had a paradise-like childhood when she adored her mother and never doubted her mother's love for her. But she lost the paradise of her childhood when she began to doubt her mother's love for her, and the experience of menarche makes this loss and her consequent hatred for her mother definite.

Saadawi's protagonist also feels as if she were in "chains forged from [her] own blood" (12). She can't run and jump because these "chains" are a form of shame and humiliation produced by the cells of her own body. She feels cursed by God, who "really hates girls" (12). Her wish for death echoes Catherine's, and her sense of shame reflects other women's traumatized experiences of bleeding.

"Growing Up" tells the story of how Midori, who lives in a geisha house with her parents and her sister, is expected to be like her sister, a famous courtesan, in the near future instead of becoming a mother. When she reaches puberty, she comes to hate growing up and mourns her carefree childhood. She has gloomy thoughts; unlike the protagonist in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, however, she does not hate men. On the contrary, her sexual awakening is represented through her love for Nobu, replacing her childish chagrin at his neglect. Puberty for Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Saadawi's protagonist in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, and many others, "is not figured as the coming of a self-chosen sexual maturity but as the signal of immanent reproductive capacities" (Grosz 205). In "Growing Up" there is no focus on potential motherhood, only on newly awakened sexual capacities. Midori is not represented only as an objectified female body but also as a girl in love. Her childish approach to Nobu, her schoolmate and an heir to the Ryugeji Temple, subtly changes. Her new shyness

and embarrassment are connected to her growth in terms of imaginative ability and sensitivity. Midori's sexual maturity might be exploited as the object of male desire, but the ending focuses instead on her desiring subjectivity as a girl in love. Thus, menstruation does not indicate reproductive reality but the potential for corporeal pleasure, though it also indicates the jeopardy of being the desired object.

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