



## **Issues of Gender Discrimination, Questions of Identity, Themes of Myth in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night***

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the woman-centredness, myth and its remembering, the larger issue of gender-discrimination, the question of identity, the theme of quest in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). It also portrays this novel as a bildungsroman, a form particularly adapted to deal with the themes of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-affirmation. This tale concentrates round the lives of the three women Devi, Mayamma and Devi's mother Sita. Hariharan has purposefully integrated the stories of mythical heroines such as Gandhari, Kunti, Sita, Amba and so on to highlight the nature and breadth of the influence of myths on the lives of human beings. Alongside the fabled legends Hariharan has sewn the stories of saints narrated by Devi's father-in-law. Hariharan has tried to disprove the myths illustrating how Devi imagines herself as a mythical princess, strays from the sanctity of household life, endures disillusionment, and ultimately awakes to plant her feet firmly on the realistic foundations.

**Keywords:** *Gender, Woman, Pain, Identity, Myth, Quest.*

## **1. Introduction**

Githa Hariharan is a postmodern writer who works with an unspoken social purpose, graphically depicting society and personal difficulties. She experiments with people's conventional beliefs, interpreting them via gynocentric lenses. She makes an attempt to connect historical events in classical works to contemporary life by showing women characters in the modern day.

Hariharan's debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, vaults her to the top of the literary mountain. It has garnered greater critical notice than Hariharan's other works. Critics have read and analysed it from a variety of perspectives, focusing on woman-centredness, myth and its remembrance, the broader issue of gender discrimination, the issue of identity, the theme of quest, and the impact of storytelling on a kid as an adult. Regardless of the novel's numerous readings and analyses, the truth remains that the novel focuses on the fundamental human condition via the lens of women in India. Hariharan has herself acknowledged in an interview.

Just because *The Thousand Faces of Night* **or** *When Dreams Travel*

address the lives of women directly, or in the second case power politics in relation to gender, this does not mean that the other novels are not informed by questions of gender. I don't think I could write a single page that would not be informed by my beliefs, or for that matter, my confusions. My work grows out of my feminism and other political beliefs. Which does not mean a novel I write is some kind of handmaiden to ideology.(web)

Thus, Hariharan has demonstrated as a writer that she is committed to the cause of women's rights without clinging to any political philosophy. *The Thousand Faces of Night* appears to be a metaphor for the hardship of Indian women who seek heaven through the fulfilment of the aspirations brought up by old women's mythology. Hariharan has successfully uncovered and disproved these beliefs about women, which are primarily manufactured by patriarchy as instruments for subjugating and complying with women. She does not, however, spare those women who believe they are free to live their life however they wish and demonstrates how they eventually meet anguish and suffering when their prospects for remorse, repentance, or rehabilitation are lost. In "Mythological Allusions in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*," Charumathi Ramaswamy avers.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* is the portrayal of different facets of women suffering different kinds of suffering and depicts the status of women in Indian society. It articulates the problems of women with the help of Indian Mythology. It yokes together the various vicissitudes faced by women of the Puranas. Githa Hariharan's novel is a dexterous conglomeration of numerous stories besides the story of the protagonist Devi. And the technique is "Passing-on" narration from one character to the other. The narration passes from Grandmother's stories, the Baba's stories and to Mayamma. (9)

Not only is *The Thousand Faces of Night* exceptional for its contemporary relevance — women and gender issues — but also for its straightforward exposition. Hariharan's attention to detail is exceptional, whether she is painting the terrain and surrounds or the physical characteristics, behaviour, and emotional state of her characters. The work is deeply detailed, and its pages can be extended to epic proportions. Hariharan has divided the novel into three sections. The novel's first section contains three chapters, while the second and third sections each feature two chapters. This structural foundation is strengthened by the Prelude, which establishes the tone and the novel's thematic focus - Mayamma's storey of pain.

As such, it is acceptable to begin with a reading of The Prelude itself, which requires the filling of multiple blank places. Mayamma informs Devi, the novel's protagonist. Her concern was caused by the fact that she had failed to fulfil her mother-in-law's wish for a boy kid. The infant died during the birth - anguish - and her mother-in-law beat her, denouncing her as a barren lady. Mayamma was overcome with fear and dismay, while her mother-in-law was enraged at the idea of losing her future grandson. Later in the narrative, Mayamma's conviction that "A woman without a child, say the sages, goes to hell" (20) reaffirms that childlessness is a true and horrible affliction, particularly for women.

As is customary in India, Devi's marriage was arranged. As a young woman, she was given limited leeway in selecting her husband. Rather than that, she was required to select one from a specific pool. Finally, she chose Mahesh, who was not the prince of her dreams, which had been implanted in her psyche by Swayamvara legends in which the princess had the choice to choose her husband. When she is confronted with the harsh and unforgiving truth of life, she is forced to leave the realm of fiction. She met and accepted Mahesh with her mother's blessings and acceptance. Devi's evaluation of Mahesh is extremely straightforward, devoid of glitz and romantic fantasies of a prince coming to marry her.

Mahesh, the stranger who is to be my husband, visits us for an house

very evening. He is no prince, but a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste (22).

Devi appears to accept her fate when Mahesh informs her about his hectic work schedule. He would spend ten days of the month in Bangalore and the remainder of the month on business excursions. She admired Mahesh's candour and willingness to be fair, even though he appeared to be an implacable pillar of propriety and common sense. Mahesh, in her opinion, was unique among prospective husbands.

Devi is able to see through the masculine world's duplicity, which strives to impose conventional roles on women, as mothers and wives. According to the masculine perspective, a woman entering marriage must be pliant enough to fulfil the roles of an excellent cook, a caring wife, and a loving mother. In other words, a woman's virtues of patience, tolerance, and stillness define her. If a woman is courageous enough to assert her independence and uniqueness, the male-dominated society labels her an unbridled horse. Devi's cognitive abilities allow her to embrace reality, and she has chosen to abandon any pretence.

During the wedding preparations, Devi recalls her grandmother, her physical characteristics, and most importantly, the legends of mythical ladies from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Devi had the opportunity to hear the stories of these selfless, brave, daring, and fearless women during her summer vacations while staying with her grandma. This link lasted until Devi reached the age of sixteen, at which point her visits ceased abruptly. Her grandma had a narrative for every occasion, and the majority of them were heroic ordeals of mythical ladies. Damayanti, Gandhari, Sita, and Amba were among these fabled females. Prior to her death, the grandmother stated that it was her blessing that would protect Devi's soul while it was in flight. Devi's dream storey is interwoven with the grandmother's mythical stories, in which she imagines herself as a superwoman as a result of her mind being flooded with accounts of heroic women who appeared in the grandmother's stories.

Devi has her own doubts and a slew of unanswered issues. She understands Mahesh has already spoken extensively about his career, his hectic schedule, and his firm. She also considers the contingent nature of marriage, which has become ingrained in her brain as a union of two souls and two bodies. Marriage is a ceremony, and as such, it cannot be rushed; it must develop gradually, like a delicate but promising sapling. Mahesh seeks solitude because he views marriage as a business transaction similar to any other.

Devi's dissatisfaction with her married life is unsurprising. She had imagined a vision of herself as a princess walking gracefully in the Swayamvara hall with all the prospective husbands sitting there, based on her grandmother's stories about mythological heroines. Her father-in-law, who is now a retired senior citizen, was a Sanskrit professor. He nourishes her with shlokas from ancient Sanskrit books, quoting passages that describe and exemplify a woman's function in the family and society. This revitalises her, reinforcing her visions of a life inspired by princesses and mythological ladies. He tells her stories that are reminiscent of those told by her grandma. Hariharan's fascination with stories of all kinds serves as a symbolic, if not obviously autobiographical, reflection on the nature and function of her grandfather's stories.

A year passes without incident during Devi's marriage, with Mahesh occupied with his trips and Mayamma administering the household as usual. Devi confronts reality and reconciles her marriage and womanhood. Her ideal of marriage as the perfect union of two bodies and souls begins to shatter. Indeed, she is disturbed, not because she has romanticised her marriage, but as a result of the unconscious influence of her grandmother's fairy tales in which she appears as a princess. Devi perceives marriage as a sacrificial knife, and she has begun to feel its cuts and pricks. Her assessment of her own marriage's worth is tainted with disillusionment and unhappiness.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* is notable for its narrative inclusively, which means that multiple narratives are woven into the fabric of the main narrative without impairing its smooth flow even

significantly. A small sliver of Devi's recollection shows how Annapurna, a distant aunt, ended up staying with her family after her parents died. Annapurna was lively, colourful, receptive, and vivacious. Thus, it is worthwhile at this point to unravel the terrible storey of Mayamma, which exemplifies women's suffering in an orthodox and tradition-bound Indian society. It unambiguously portrays women as child-carrying machines designed to advance the family line by bearing a male offspring.

Mayamma's excruciating and painful storey as a woman - both as a wife's mother and as a daughter-in-law - does not end with her thankful recall of the link she created with Parvatiamma. Hariharan has purposefully reserved sufficient space for the full expression of the silent tears that recur throughout Mayamma's traumatic existence as a wife and mother. The second chapter of *The Thousand Faces of Night's* third portion delves into the labyrinth of her prior life in her marital home. She was continually ground in the torture machine that her nasty, superstitious, and insensitive mother-in-law powered and ran. She subjected Mayamma to inhumane torture for the only reason that she did not bear her a grandson very quickly. Mayamma, on the other hand, never protested and obediently obeyed her directions.

There is a reference to her mother-in-law's brutality against Mayamma, who did as she was told and instructed in order to fulfil her position as a wife and mother. Mayamma explodes with rage since she never received freshly cooked rice to eat and her mother-in-law was jealous and intolerant of her wearing a new sari. One would be hard pressed to discover examples of such witch-like brutality done on another woman by another woman. Childlessness/barrenness is more than a curse for a lady who suffers from this misfortune in a tradition-bound nation like India.

Occasionally, women are unable to produce children due to a fault in their husbands, yet only women are labelled barren, while an infertile husband escapes guilt for barrenness/infertility. Indeed, Mayamma's mother-in-law epitomises the superstitious woman who inflicts horrible injuries on other women in order to satisfy her whims and feign respectability. Mayamma is subjected to every conceivable form of torture through no fault of her own. Mayamma's husband, too, treated her harshly, dallying with her in the late hours of the night as an object of his passionate passion. One may imagine how his impure behaviour tore apart her aspirations of a satisfied wifehood.

Mayamma recalls how her mother-in-law had examined her closely before the match was made. She had taken the girl aside and cross-questioned her about the jewellery she was wearing. Were they hers or her sister's? She tugged at Mayamma's long, thick plait to make sure it was all real. Unable to check Mayamma's insides herself, she had contented herself with the astrologer's promise that Mayamma would Bear her many strong grandsons. (80)

As a result, Mayamma's experience of wifehood and motherhood is rife with anguish and pain. Even motherhood has lost its significance and worth for her with the death of her son, Raja. She is still repulsed by the presence of her womb and wishes to tear it out and discard it in the garbage. Indeed, she uses her womb as a tribute to her miscarried child. Mayamma's storey has a catastrophic effect on Devi, who learns the futility of being a wife and mother via the retelling. When Devi ultimately decides to leave Mahesh and flee with Gopal in search of liberty and joy, Mayamma does not intervene despite her knowledge of the situation.

Devi's secret elopement will be revealed very soon. Sita, whom Devi's mother addressed as Amma, hears the news via a cry tic telegraph sent by Mahesh. Hariharan places a particular emphasis on Sita throughout the novel. Sita was meticulous, conscientious, and tenacious. She was capable of, and did, rule with an iron fist. She considered all three of them (Mahadevan, Devi, and herself), and when she could do so without violating decorum, she acted on their behalf, swiftly and decisively, and most importantly, unobtrusively: Her reign was not always easy; there were numerous minor setbacks. Devi and Mahadevan had developed into the cunning, shifty-eyed conspirators of a rebellion that threatened

to erupt via books, daydreams, gods and goddesses, secret places, and the innocent sensuality of a stranger like Annapurna.

Despite her seeming resolve to be practical and matter-of-fact like her husband, Mahesh, Devi is unable to resist the myth-filled world of her dreams and falls victim to Gopal's illusion of music. "His music was no longer a distant call, romantic because unknown, magnetic because her own experience was so splintered and light-weight" (127). Other elements contributed to her fall and slide into Gopal's make-believe world: Mahesh's extended absences, her loneliness and dissatisfaction, and Mayamma's terrible life experience, which reduced the ideals of wifehood and motherhood to a farce of female identity/womanhood.

Sita's life appeared virtually complete to an experienced, practical, and successful woman. In comparison, Devi's life appears unorganised and fragmented to her. What she lacked was her mother's tenacity, the capacity for making sacrifices, and a sense of resignation in the face of the turbulence of stress and pressures brought on by feelings' violence. Sita possessed masterful control over her emotions, overcoming odds and obstacles with ease, but her daughter Devi did not; for she was a dreamy woman disconnected from actual reality. In "Identity of Cultural Crisis of Protagonist in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*," P. Padmini, and S.K. Sudha have rightly observed that.

in *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)

## 2. Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing analysis of *The Thousand Faces of Night* that it brings alive the underworld of Indian women's lives through the stories of Devi, Sita and Mayamma. There are lyrical passages of great beauty that add to the allure of the protagonist, Devi's, psychic journey. Mayamma, Sita, and Devi's stories are expertly woven together to illuminate the inner world of Indian women, where most hopes are dashed and the only constant is survival. Hariharan has attempted to dispel the aura that surrounds mythical ladies, demonstrating how reality shatters the dreamy realm of mythology through the figure of Devi.

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