

Voices from the Margins: Women's Struggles in Githa Hariharan's the Thousand Faces of Night

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan's the Thousand Faces of Night(1998) is a seminal feminist novel that foregrounds the silenced experiences of Indian women trapped within patriarchal structures of family, marriage, and tradition. This research paper examines how the novel articulates women's struggles from the margins by portraying female lives shaped by silence, suppression, and cultural expectation. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminism, and mythological revisionism, the study explores how Hariharan dismantles dominant narratives of womanhood by re-imagining myth, memory, and domestic space through women's perspectives. The novel gives voice to marginalized figures such as Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, whose lives reflect intergenerational oppression as well as subtle resistance. This paper argues that The Thousand Faces of Night exposes patriarchy not as an abstract ideology but as a lived reality embedded in everyday domestic practices. By reclaiming women's voices and rewriting mythological paradigms, Hariharan presents women's suffering as historically constructed and therefore open to transformation. The study contributes to feminist discourse by highlighting how marginal voices challenge cultural silence and redefine female identity in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Keywords: Marginality, Patriarchal Society, Feminist, Suppression, Conviction, Self-identity.

Introduction

Indian English literature has played a crucial role in articulating women's experiences within a deeply patriarchal society. For centuries, women's lives have been structured by rigid gender roles that confine them to domestic spaces, restrict their autonomy, and silence their desires. Literature, traditionally dominated by male voices, often reinforced these norms by portraying women as passive, obedient, and self-sacrificing. However, with the rise of feminist writing in post-independence India, women writers began challenging these representations, giving voice to suppressed experiences and questioning cultural ideals of womanhood. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) stands as a landmark feminist novel that exposes the emotional, psychological, and social struggles of women across generations. Set primarily within domestic spaces, the novel explores how women internalize oppression and how silence becomes both a burden and a mode of survival. Hariharan does not depict dramatic rebellion or overt resistance; instead, she focuses on the quiet suffering and muted endurance that characterize women's everyday lives. This emphasis on the ordinary makes the novel particularly powerful, as it reveals how patriarchy operates subtly through tradition, marriage, and family expectations. The title *The Thousand Faces of Night* itself is symbolic, suggesting the multiple, hidden realities of women's lives that remain unseen and unheard. Each female character represents a different "face" of oppression—daughterhood, wifehood, widowhood, motherhood—yet all are bound by the same

structures of control. The novel exposes how women's identities are shaped by others' expectations rather than their own desires, leaving them fragmented and voiceless. This research paper seeks to analyze *The Thousand Faces of Night* as a narrative of marginal voices, focusing on women's struggles within patriarchal society. It argues that Hariharan constructs a feminist discourse that challenges silence, reclaims mythological narratives, and foregrounds women's consciousness. By examining the experiences of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, the paper explores how marginality becomes a shared condition across class and generational lines. The study also highlights the novel's relevance to contemporary feminist debates on gender, agency, and cultural memory.

The Thousand Faces of Night by Githa Hariharan presents a deeply women-centred narrative that foregrounds the experiences, struggles, and subjectivities of its major female characters—Sita, Devi, and Mayamma. The novel examines the condition of women within a patriarchal social framework and highlights the complex processes through which female identity is shaped and constrained. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, represents the modern, educated woman who attempts to negotiate her individuality within the restrictive norms of traditional Indian society. Her character embodies the dilemmas and conflicts faced by contemporary women who seek autonomy and self-definition while remaining embedded in familial and cultural expectations. In addition to Devi, other female figures such as her mother Sita, her mother-in-law Parvatiamma, the old family retainer Mayamma, Uma, and her grandmother represent different generations of women who experience varying forms of marginalization and oppression. Each of these characters reveals how patriarchal structures operate within domestic and social spaces, limiting women's agency and shaping their identities. Through these interconnected female experiences, Hariharan exposes the pervasive nature of gender-based subordination and the emotional and psychological consequences it produces.

The narrative also draws significantly upon mythological parallels to illuminate the condition of women in contemporary society. By linking the lives of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma with mythic female archetypes, Hariharan reinterprets traditional myths from a feminist perspective and challenges the ideological assumptions embedded within them. This narrative strategy enables the novelist to question the cultural narratives that have historically defined women in terms of sacrifice, obedience, and silence.

Hariharan interrogates and destabilizes established ideas and grand narratives that have traditionally governed gender roles and social hierarchies. The novel thus engages with themes such as freedom, self-realization, self-image, and the quest for identity. Devi's journey becomes a symbolic representation of a woman's struggle to assert her individuality within a society structured by patriarchal norms.

Ultimately, the novel traces Devi's search for selfhood as she confronts both external social constraints and internal psychological conflicts. By intricately interweaving the lives of the foreign-returned young woman Devi, the self-sacrificing mother Sita, and the long-suffering caretaker Mayamma, Hariharan constructs a layered narrative that reveals the diverse dimensions of women's oppression while simultaneously suggesting possibilities of resistance, transformation, and self-discovery. Devi, the central character, does not conform to the idealized image of womanhood represented by her mother Sita, nor does she possess the spiritual authority associated with her mother-in-law, Parvatiamma. Instead, she is portrayed as an ordinary yet educated and modern Indian woman who experiences desires, aspirations, and personal ambitions within the framework of society. Devi represents a woman who seeks to assert her individuality rather than passively accept the traditionally prescribed role of a submissive wife in marriage. She resists compromising her emotional and biological needs in order to conform to rigid social expectations.

Although Devi is born and raised in a traditional Hindu Brahmin family, her education and exposure to Western culture significantly shape her outlook. She completes her master's degree in America, an experience that further intensifies her struggle between traditional values and modern aspirations. During her childhood, however, her grandmother attempts to mould her identity according to conventional ideals of Indian womanhood through the medium of mythological storytelling. These stories become an important cultural backdrop in the formation of Devi's understanding of womanhood.

Through her narratives, the grandmother tries to instill values such as self-sacrifice, duty, patience, and endurance in Devi. She frequently recounts the stories of mythological figures like Sita, Savitri, and Anasuya—women traditionally celebrated for their virtue and devotion. At the same time, she also narrates the stories of marginalized female figures such as Gandhari, Amba, and Ganga, thereby presenting complex examples of feminine experience within mythological tradition. Devi later reflects on

how these stories functioned as a means of transmitting cultural values, conventions, and moral lessons. As she recalls: "My grandmother stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion a story in reply to each of my childish questions. She had an answer for every question. But her answers were not simple, they had to be decoded; a comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered and a moral drawn out." (Hariharan 27)

This recollection highlights the manner in which mythological narratives were used as subtle tools of socialization, shaping Devi's perception of femininity, morality, and cultural tradition.

After completing her education in the United States, Devi returns to India at the request of her mother. However, upon her return, she experiences a sense of alienation and displacement within her own familial and social environment. Devi finds it difficult to relate to her relatives and the routine concerns that dominate their conversations. Reflecting on this uncomfortable situation, she remarks: "I sat with them, listened to their news bulletins of births mismanage, illness and deaths and answered their probing questions with evasive monosyllables" (Hariharan 14). This statement clearly reveals Devi's emotional distance and her inability to integrate easily into the conventional social atmosphere surrounding her. Despite her discomfort,

Devi attempts to adjust herself to the expectations of traditional Indian society. Soon after her return, her mother Sita arranges her marriage with Mahesh, who works as a regional manager in a company. However, Devi's married life gradually turns into a form of isolation and confinement. She soon realizes that she occupies only a marginal place in her husband's life. For Mahesh, professional success and career advancement are the primary priorities, leaving little space for emotional intimacy within the marriage. As a result, Devi finds her marital relationship devoid of warmth, companionship, and emotional fulfillment. In an attempt to create a sense of independence and purpose, Devi expresses her desire to take up a job. However, Mahesh discourages this idea and refuses to support her decision. His response reflects the patriarchal expectations imposed upon married women, particularly the assumption that their primary responsibility lies within the domestic sphere. When Devi mentions her intention to work, Mahesh questions her decision by asking what she will do once they have a child: "what will you do when the baby comes?" (Hariharan 64) Mahesh admits the marriage is a gamble in which wife should adapt herself to the consequences and should play the roles of traditional wife and mother at home. But for Devi, "a marriage cannot be forced into suddenly being there it must grow gradually like a delicate but promising sapling" (Hariharan 49)

Mahesh is dominant enough to suppress all of Devi's feelings, thoughts, and preferences. She is denied the right to live as an independent individual, as her freedom is constantly restricted. Mahesh represents a typical traditional Indian man who believes that a woman should not be independent. In Indian society, biological expectations from women are considered highly important. Even in the modern world, society still places great value on a woman giving birth to a male child. Mahesh also reflects this traditional mentality, viewing a woman as a puppet in the hands of a man.

Devi, however, expects marriage to be a perfect union between two individuals based on mutual understanding and emotional companionship. But Mahesh, like many traditional Indian men, considers marriage merely as a social responsibility and therefore refuses to grant freedom to his wife, Devi. Both Mahesh and his father ridicule her dreams and aspirations. Being exposed to American socio-cultural life, Devi develops a more independent outlook and eventually revolts against Mahesh's patriarchal authority. When she realizes his hypocrisy and oppressive behaviour, she leaves him and elopes with Gopal. By doing so, she rejects the conventional expectations associated with married life. Hoping to discover her emotional voice through music, she moves in with Gopal. However, the excitement of the new relationship gradually fades, and Devi realizes that Gopal is no better than Mahesh. He too behaves like other men shaped by the same patriarchal mindset. Mayamma is another significant female character in the novel who experiences extreme male domination and oppression. She serves as the old family retainer in Devi's in-laws' house and represents the silent suffering of many women in a patriarchal society. Throughout her life, she sacrifices her personal wishes merely to survive.

Mayamma was married at the very young age of twelve with the usual blessings and rituals that accompany marriage. However, her married life soon turns into a painful experience when her husband proves to be irresponsible and dishonest. At the same time, her mother-in-law treats her harshly and even takes away her jewellery. As the years pass and Mayamma is unable to bear a child, her mother-in-law begins to blame and insult her continuously for her childlessness. Describing her situation, Hariharan writes, "Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to

swim." This statement highlights the harsh reality of early marriage in Indian society, where young girls are forced into marital responsibilities before they are mature enough to understand them.

Mayamma is constantly ill-treated by both her husband and her mother-in-law because she does not bear a child. She endures humiliation, suffering, and harsh treatment without protest and remains largely suppressed and silenced. Eventually, she leaves her home carrying the painful memories of her past. Later she arrives at Parvati Amma's house, where she begins working as a caretaker.

Despite being illiterate and one of the most oppressed characters in the narrative, Mayamma rarely complains about her hardships. Her suffering increases further when, after many years, she finally gives birth to a baby boy, but her husband eventually abandons her after taking away the money from the house. This act of desertion deepens her anguish and leaves her with even greater burdens. With no other means of survival, Mayamma continues to endure a life of sacrifice, humiliation, and hardship. Eventually she finds shelter in the house of Parvati Amma, Devi's mother-in-law, where she works as a family retainer. Her life remains marked by continuous struggle, suffering, and relentless labour. Sita, Devi's mother, is another important female character. At the age of twenty-one, she goes to her in-laws' house with the hope of becoming a perfect wife and an ideal daughter-in-law. Although she succeeds in fulfilling these roles and is recognized as a dutiful mother and responsible daughter-in-law, this success comes at the cost of personal sacrifice. As part of her dowry, Sita brings a veena with her. As the grandmother recalls, Sita's parents had recognized her musical talent from childhood and trained her under the best teacher they could find. She played the instrument so beautifully that the entire household would pause to listen. However, one day when the pooja room had not been properly attended to—"The flowers has not been picked, the flower had beat been swept"—her father-in-law angrily rebukes her while she is playing the veena and says, "put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter in law? (Hariharan 30)." After this incident, she never touches the veena again. From that moment, Sita suppresses her artistic identity and devotes herself completely to her domestic responsibilities. She becomes the dutiful daughter-in-law admired by neighbors, but her personal aspirations disappear. Like Gandhari, who blindfolds herself out of loyalty to her blind husband Dhritarashtra, Sita submits unwillingly to patriarchal authority. Even the photographs in which she once posed with her veena are destroyed, symbolizing the death of the artist within her. Although she performs her duties as a woman with dedication, it is achieved through the sacrifice of her individuality and creative identity. Even in her later life, Sita continues to live for others, suppressing her own desires. The history of human civilization is full of instances of female marginalization and devaluation, and Sita's life reflects this painful reality. Having herself been shaped by patriarchal expectations, Sita arranges a marriage for her educated daughter Devi, which ultimately becomes tragic.

Both Sita and Mayamma face numerous obstacles in the development of their individual identities. Their lives are marked by suffering, sacrifice, and endurance. Devi, however, represents a different response. Unlike them, she refuses to passively accept traditional social norms. She imagines herself as a strong and independent woman and reflects: "I lived a secret life of my own I became a woman warrior, a heroine. It was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut off evil magical demon's heads. (Hariharan 41)." Mahesh fails to establish an affectionate relationship with her, and therefore Devi refuses to endure suffering silently like Mayamma. Instead, she leaves Mahesh and elopes with Gopal. Later, when she realizes that Gopal too behaves like a benevolent despot, she leaves him as well and finally returns to her mother. Uma is another minor character and Devi's cousin who endures great suffering and lives a miserable life. She is mistreated by her husband, while her drunken father-in-law physically abuses her. As a result, she becomes deeply depressed and spends her life in sorrow, silently tolerating all the hardships that fate brings her. Her condition reflects how women are subjugated in a male-dominated and stereotyped society. In such a social structure, women are pushed to the margins while men occupy the centre through their hegemonic power, thereby maintaining their authority and identity over women. Women often suppress their own individuality in order to uphold the identity of their husbands. Consequently, women are portrayed as secondary beings in comparison with men and are forced into subordinate positions. Although Githa Hariharan highlights the marginalization and subjugation of women, she also allows her female characters to struggle and survive with dignity and determination while confronting the challenges of life. Devi represents the modern, intellectual woman who rejects patriarchal domination, whereas characters like Sita, Mayamma, and Uma adopt a resilient stance to endure the ordeals of their existence. Patriarchy operates through a system of power relations in which men control women's production, reproduction, and sexuality. This patriarchal structure has prevailed in society since the ancient Vedic period. Through her narrative, Hariharan carefully portrays the Indian

social system and presents a realistic depiction of the condition of women in Indian society. She examines the inferior status of women within the traditional social order and system. She exposes the harsh realities of Indian patriarchal bourgeois society that has humiliated, oppressed, and silenced women from the time of Gandhari to the present day. At the same time, she shows that women in the postmodern age have begun to shape their own identities. It is evident that women have become increasingly aware of their position and the conditions of their lives. They have started questioning and rejecting orthodox beliefs, particularly the institution of marriage in which men exercise authority over women. By referring to female figures such as Gandhari, Damyanti, Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika from the great epic and comparing them with characters like Devi, Sita, Uma, and Mayamma, Githa Hariharan presents a powerful depiction of the pessimistic, sorrowful, and often disappointing realities of women's lives in contemporary society. Through these female characters, she illustrates how women have been victimized in ways that constantly suppress their individuality. However, while highlighting the marginalization and traditional constraints faced by both textual and intertextual characters, Hariharan also suggests their gradual awakening and revival.

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