

# Feminist Interpretation of Githa Hariharan in “*The Thousand faces of Night*”

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## Abstract

Throughout history, in the name of bread-winning, men have the privileges to accept the public arenas that grant them power, while women are still being restricted to interaction on the home front. As a legal contract, and social institution, marriage and family maintains a great deal of power in society, both historically and contemporarily. Githa Hariharan claims that it has made a great impact on the psyche of the silenced sect to such an extent that they themselves start to judge their personal fulfillment through its strength unmindful of the male dominance and restriction within the domestic sphere. This paper focuses on the changing perspectives of women psyche in the novel of Githa Hariharan with special reference to growing awareness and their persistent efforts to break away from the stultifying male ideology. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* of Githa Hariharan reveal the long distance that Indian women have traversed, starting from subjugation and servitude to persevering protests and finally arriving at assertion of their identity against the patriarchal society. In particular *The Thousand Faces of Night* present different stages of feminine progress.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Quest, Tradition, self-identity, Modernity.

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Elaine Showalter, a familiar American feminist critic identifies the progress of women as ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ and ‘female’. Based on this concept the paper studies the travel taken by the women characters and how Githa Hariharan has created her own model, pattern and concept of ‘feminism’. She draws inspiration from the plight, the struggle, the resistance and revolt practiced by the contemporary Indian women of all classes and creeds -- urban or rural. To Elaine Showalter the terms ‘feminine’, (imitative), ‘feminist’ (protest) and ‘female’ (self discovery) denote developmental stages. In general, critics accept the concept of

‘feminine’ or ‘femininity’ as denoting lack, negativity, marginality, and absence of meaning. It is also characterized by subservience and modesty. ‘Feminist’ or ‘feminism’ stands for anger and revolt and is characterized by aggressiveness, the competitive spirit and vindictiveness. ‘Female’ is the stage which the contemporary feminists want to achieve. At this level, the question of identity is resolved and a woman becomes an autonomous whole.

The women characters Mayamma, Parvatamma, Sita, Devi and the grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, all belong to different generations. They play active roles in developing the plot of the novel. They are categorized in the terms of Elaine Showalter as ‘feminine’ ‘feminist’ and ‘female’. Though they are labeled in Showalterian sense, a kind of development is sensed within each of them towards the next stage. This paper traces the progress of women characters towards independence and establishing individual identity in terms of the fictional constructions of feminist individualism within marriage and family.

Feminists in recent years have argued that marriage is often enforced as oppressive in spite of its benefits. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir: “*Marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always it annihilates woman*” (*The Second Sex*). Mayamma, the servant maid and the grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night* are identified as ‘feminine’ who seem to fulfill every criterion of complete feminine development. They are excellent wives, mothers, and capable housewives. Mayamma, the family retainer in the house of Devi’s father-in-law is the archetypal female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it, and lived her life exactly as she was expected to. She bore the brunt of cruelty that the patriarchal family had ordained for a woman as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law and a mother. She made no choice and she had no choice but to live a predetermined life.

Mayamma’s life is battered, violence-filled existence. She was twelve when she was married, “who rubbed her eyes and yawned as she leaned back in her father’s lap” (TFN: 79). Her innocent childhood was nipped in the bud. Unfortunately, she did not bear a child even after ten years of marriage. As a practice of penance for being ‘barren’ she “dipped herself again and again in pure coldness-starved every other day-gave up salt and tamarind ...” (TFN: 80)

In addition, the mother-in-law tortured her by feeding her yesterday's rice because she felt "what is the use of feeding a barren woman" (TFN: 112). The husband called her "a shameless hussy" (TFN: 111) and kicked her "after a night of whoring in the rain" (TFN: 111). The miseries of Mayamma came to a halt tentatively after a son was born to her. However, when the child was eight, Mayamma's husband deserted her. Afterwards, she found his replica in her son. He had been a wastrel from birth often threatening, cursing and even beating his mother. Yet, she never questioned these atrocities of patriarchal family, never raised a voice or tried to escape from this living hell. She had learnt the art of survival painfully and slowly. On seeing the prolonging frustrations in life which are not under her control, she prepares her mind to practice its own defense-mechanism.

Devi the protagonist of *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a young and a product of western education finds that her life is full of disillusionment and she has all along thrived on illusions of womanhood. Devi at the age of adolescence was a pet, as well as like Sri Devi for her grandmother. When she was in abroad she was escorted by her boy friend Dan. Her mother fulfilled her needs, gave her good education at America and at the right time she arranged marriage with Mahesh. But after marriage she feels that she has lost everything in her life. Devi's dream-like life comes to an end when she is married to Mahesh, a Regional manager in a multinational company. At first Devi admired Mahesh's frank speech, later she realized that he is too Indian and as well as he sees everything in a business motto including family and wife. He does not want to share anything with his wife except the needs of his body. He goes on long tours for weeks together on business. In an accident, it is found that Devi asked Mahesh to postpone the business trip. But Mahesh insulted her saying, "Why don't I pray to be born a woman in my next birth, then I won't have to make a living at all." (TFN 54)

Mahesh did not care for her and he was busy with his business schedule and tour. Devi was left alone and whenever he was back to home he asks, "Any news, his eyes quickly appraise my body, all bones and flat stomach." (TFN 86) is regarding her pregnancy. But on the other hand Devi was much worried about her loneliness and she thinks that her valuable education is of waste. She says, "I swallowed my hard-earned

education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied *thali* round my neck?” (TFN 74) Mahesh expects her to be a housewife and he wants her to carry his baby. One day when he was at home he says, “Let’s have a baby. There’s no reason to wait. I want you to have my baby.” (TFN 74) she didn’t expect such a persecution kind of treatment by her husband. Whenever she was insulted and left alone Mayamma, the housemaid comforts and consoles her by saying, that the women should follow the traditional way of life to prove their womanhood. Devi’s father-in-law Baba also suppresses her thoughts by telling her about the traditional woman. Baba’s stories remind her of her grandmother. Her stories were a prelude to her womanhood, they are ramble less but father-in-law’s stories are exactly for a woman, a wife. He often tells her about the role of woman in a household. He stressed now and then that a woman can reach Heaven by serving the family. He says,

*“The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens. On the death of her husband, the chaste wife, established in continence, reaches heaven, even if childless, like students who have practiced self-control”*. (TFN 55)

Devi was left alone when her father-in-law went abroad. She got the company of Gopal, the musician and she was much impressed by his care towards her. She thought of fulfilling her emptiness and liberates her imprisoned soul. She was embraced and as a result, Devi eloped with Gopal knowing very well that the affair with Gopal will be a short one and she would not be happy with him. In order to revenge Mahesh she acts against her own self. Devi’s interrogative spirit prods her from the lethargic material comforts of the life and puts her on the quest for identity.

In Devi’s life Gopal is yet another character of exoticism. She feels the superficial feeling of freedom. Her relationship with Gopal shows that she confronts her loneliness and alienation. As she predicts earlier, the affair with Gopal proves to be a short one. He is a flirt with aspirations for an aristocratic way of life. Devi gets disillusioned with him and moves once again. This time she thought “no longer on the run” (TFN 138) Devi transgresses the tradition Indian women as she was very much enchanted by her grandmother’s mythification of stories narrated from the great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Whenever the occasion arises the grandmother narrates a story in response to the questions of the curious Devi, instead of giving a direct answer. Through the mythical characters like Gandhari, Amba, Ambalika and Ambika she was well informed

about the women's pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. Devi imagined herself as a woman warrior, a heroine and rode on a tiger to cut off evils and also she built the courage in her. She says, "I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads" (TFN 41) she feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba and suffers like the lady who married the snake. She also feels that the new life is in contrast with her previous life.

Devi, with modest ambition struggles because of her father's sudden death, unexpected rejection of her love with her American friend Dan, the vast emptiness in her in-law's house, and long spells of absence of her husband. The death of her father-in-law affects her as he was a good friend of her. She also reckons her inability to issue children, which makes her to elope with Gopal. She destroys the thread of marriage bond as she thought him an ideal companionship to revenge Mahesh.

Githa Hariharan attempts to tear apart the veil of sophistication and social equality by presenting the status of women even in the present age. She tries to portray the custom-ridden Indian society, especially in southern part of India. Devi is the specimens who live a miserable and pitiable life as she found it very difficult to suit her to environment in which she lives.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan presents a chain of events related to men and women, love and death, and emotions as well as painful loneliness. She intersperses it with myth and folklore with the social status of women within the boundaries of time, space and region. This novel exposes the underworld faces of Indian women's lives and throws light on the emerging womanhood. This also reveals the unending fight for their rights and their quest for self identity in the present world.

Githa Hariharan ends her novel with Devi's final decision that no longer on the run and she moves out from Gopal and she returned back to her mother to start a fresh life. When she entered the garden of her mother's home she was invited by the note of Veena played by her mother. It provides the favorable climate for the process of renewal. Githa Hariharan clearly pictures the boredom and loneliness experienced by married woman when she feels ignored and unwanted. Githa Hariharan is engaged in different degrees with social reforms, what makes her writer-activists, as she is sensitive to gender and caste experiences. Hariharan's

protagonist Devi rejects the tradition and opted for the positive aspects of modernity. She breaks the tradition and enters the world in which she believes. Githa Hariharan considered her art of writing ‘ a mission’ and has not handled any trivial theme in her novel for novel’ s sake. She has documented almost all the sufferings of women and analysed the real problems of Indian women in different angles.

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