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## **Womanhood: A Retrospection on Githa Hariharan's Novel *The Thousand Faces of Night.***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The present article depicted how far Githa Hariharan had succeeded in picturizing the concept of womanhood and describing the relevance of this concept in the modern Indian society. It attempted to delineate how women dealt with the sanction of space in Indian society. Her novels presented the efforts of patriarchy on women of different social classes and ages particularly the varied reactions to the restrictive institution of marriage especially in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Through her novels Hariharan contrasted the role and position of women in our society. Gita Hariharan delineated the concepts of woman in a traditional society and the responsibilities and services expected from women.*

Gita Hariharan is unique among Indian English Writers with her refined portrayal of the Indian characters. She is a morning star in Indian Fiction in English who became a literary celebrity with her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1993. She was anxious with the inner world of sensibility. She no longer remained content with women's passive role as woman and wife hence, voiced her angry protest. She crumpled the age-old wisdom of saying proverbs, stories, myths and beliefs. Her anger voiced itself through the mode of satire, irony and cynicism. Her vision comprehended the whole history of woman's role instructed and the emergence of new woman who was true to her own self.

This article briefly analyses Gita Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* in the light of womanhood and defines the identity of Indian women. It attempts to portray the efforts of Gita Hariharan in creating a new archetype of women's identity and demarcate the suffering and predicament of women.

Womanhood needed to be defined by women. Older women who mattered to the girl should be a part of teaching the skills to survive successfully and conscientiously in one's culture as women. In other culture, older women, who uphold the values of femaleness decided when a girl could join them in womanhood. Things considered in making this decision would be the level of maturity she had attained. In Indian culture men decided. This decision was primarily on how a female looked. Loss of virginity and pregnancy were also definitions of womanhood in Indian culture.

In Indian social milieu, a true womanhood was assessed on four cardinal virtues like piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Without these cardinal values a woman was considered ashes. With these cardinal values a woman was promised cheerfulness and power.

Religion belongs to woman by divine right, a gift of God and Nature. This 'peculiar susceptibility' to religion was given her for a reason: the vestal flame of piety, lightened up by Heaven in the breasts of women would throw its beams into the naughty world of men. So far would the candlepower reach that the universe might be enlightened, improve, and harmonised by woman bringing the world back from its revolt and sin.

Mild, submissive, domesticated, unprotesting and self-sacrificing woman was an essential adornment of the patriarchal social set up in the world over. Clever manipulation of the inequitable relations by the male kept the stereotypical position of woman intact. Looking sweet, charming and attractive to make herself a desirable 'object' of the 'subject' (the male) was regarded as the well-defined orbit of woman and she went about it without the least consciousness of her occupying the margin. Space in the sexual politics was game, which the male almost always played to his decisive advantage. Child bearing, child rearing and keeping the house in order for the husband-master were unquestionable tasks a woman performed to the husband's satisfaction and delight. Failure in these areas evoked censure, even rejection. Barrenness for a woman, for example, was

regarded the greatest curse for a woman. Infertility was considered inauspicious and the barren woman had to bear censorship of her immediate family and face social contempt and ostracization from auspicious functions in the society at large. Deviance in child rearing was frowned upon. The woman had to be on her toes, even if she found it physically at times beyond herself. Even today, in the Indian social milieus of the lower stratum of society, woman was accustomed to the frequent or occasional beatings she received and the money she earned by manual slogging, being snatched by her drunkard husband.

Generally there were two types of roles played by woman characters in Indian fiction: the conventional and unconventional. Both types suffered in one way or the other. The suffering of conventional woman were sanctified by the norms of Indian culture and particularly by that of a patriarchal culture. The conflict between tradition and modernity found a prominent place in the portrayal of women by the women novelists. A tradition bound woman might sacrifice her happiness for the sake of the well-being of the family as a unit, but at the same time retained her individuality. Indian woman didn't bother about her personal happiness and comfort as much as she addressed herself to the task of making others happy and upholding tradition and convention. A woman might be seen and understood by her father in one way, her husband in another way, her son and daughter in some other ways and by herself in yet another way. Keeping all this views in mind, the writers especially woman writers reflected the same in the fiction.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* was structured around the sexual and marital experience of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma. The strategy adopted by Gita Hariharan was to highlight Devi's experience by interspersing it with events related to Sita's and Mayamma's personal life. These alternative points of view explored the position of woman entrapped in typical male power structures. It portrayed women as vulnerable individuals craving for love and understanding, while all the time being victims of their own gender.

Gita Hariharan's novel successfully juxtaposed and intermingled the lives of a foreign returned young girl Devi, her artistically inclined mother Sita, an old caretaker Mayamma, to present a picture of the multifaceted Indian woman. *The Thousand Faces of Night* had Devi, a middle class girl as its protagonist. Born in a traditional Tamil Brahmin family, she was sent abroad for higher education. Refusing an offer of marriage from her black American friend, Dan, she returned to India for the sake of her widowed mother. Once in India, her naked, vulnerable self got easily sucked in by the stifling cocoon of her mother's love and concern. Placing a forbidding hand on her daughter's American experience gently but firmly, Sita led Devi to the altar of marriage. Married to Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company, Devi tried to fit herself the role of a wife and daughter-in-law just as his mother did years ago. But, while Sita had succeeded in reaching her goal of wifehood with a dogged determination and relentless self-discipline, leading her husband more like a "conductor" than an "accompanist"(103), she shrank into being a cipher. The vast, empty ancestral house, surrounded by a large, wild garden became a focal point of her existence. Her husband "always on tours, remained a shadowy stranger who viewed marriage as just another necessity. While Devi pined that her heart remained untouched and not even sought for, Mahesh feels thankful that Indian's were not obsessed with love" (55). Devi felt that her education had not prepared her for "the vast, yawning chapters of her womanhood" (54) and so she was defenseless against Mahesh's supreme confidence and superciliousness. Whenever, she expressed a wish to do something she really desired, like learning Sanskrit or taking up a job, or at least learning to play cards so that she could be with him, Mahesh expressed his disapproval only through an inward movement of his lips "weaves a cunning cord around her vulnerable neck" (56). Her freedom being thwarted, the gaping emptiness threatening her very existence, Devi sought refuge in the stories of Baba her gentle father-in-law and in his sweet wisdom.

While her grandmother stories about the mythological characters like Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti initiated her into the numerous subterranean possibilities of womanhood, Baba's stories defined Devi the limits of wifehood. Fed on the stories of virtuous wives who were instrumental in making their husbands walk on the spiritual path, Devi tried to pull out all the stubborn weeds out of her garden. Failing to pierce the grey, impenetrable walls that Mahesh built around himself, she symbolically decided to grow "a garden of weeds" (58) instead, so that she too might survive like the weeds against all odds.

Alone in the house with Mayamma, an old house-keeper, and Baba's orphaned books after his departure for New York, Devi was engulfed by an awesome loneliness and a wave of uselessness. Her sense of futility overwhelmed her as both the men she had trusted and loved, her father and father-in-law escaped from the "tortured grip of the pain, loneliness and guilt" (84), by dying and her gentle mother-in-law, Parvathamma by fleeing the house in search of God long before her arrival. Drawn to 'Kriya' in Baba's books more than the 'kriti' he quoted earlier, Devi was filled with fury as she was expected to swallow her hard earned education and follow her husband's "self contained footprints" (84) with clumsy and stumbling feet. While she still tried to resign herself to her "precious dungeon" (74), her inner organs and tubes began to stray as a mark of rebellion, denying the much sought after father-hood to Mahesh.

Encouraged by this act of rebellion, Devi tuned herself to the "blissful numbness" of Gopal's music, which opened a way out of the "lush prison" (78) around her. But the futility of the attempt was represented by her inability to understand his music. Eventually, after having rejected existing myths and role models, Devi created a different destiny for herself as she sought to find a renewed meaning to her relationship with her mother. In the end as the strains of music drew the waiting mother and the returning daughter's bond, each would be able to give herself a specific definition of womanhood. Devi rejected the idea of being a reflection of the male. However, instead of sinking into a despairing isolation, she resolved to rewrite another bond, the female-female one. On the novel this bond derived its power from the women's previous sense of isolation, from their illtreatment by men, and from their discovery through suffering of the saving grace of shared experience. For Devi, there was a hope and a sense of rejuvenation as the past was erased and the present became an experience to build a future. Devi's final assertion of her autonomy was thus the celebration of the power of the divine Devi as well as that of the entire community of women.

Sita, Devi's mother, in fact fitted the ideal description of womanhood. Sita, as her name signified was symbolic of an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She saw her femininity as an "illusion" and so she "seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of her soul till the enticing stems of the seven noted scale came, apart, broken and disharmonious in a cluster of pathetic twangs" (105). By giving up her veena she was giving up Saraswathi, to take on another goddess, the most ferocious of all, Kali. She meticulously planned the lives of her husband, her daughter and herself with clinical efficiency. She led her husband from promotion to promotion as he moved up the corporate ladder. When Devi was born she found a new 'Veena' to play on. She planned Devi's education and sent her to America. She sent her husband, Mahadevan to Africa on a prestigious assignment. However the strain proved too much for him and he died of a cardiac arrest. She erased his memories quickly and efficiently in a modern crematorium before returning to India. Then she devoted all her talents and tastes, even her life for the well being of her daughter Devi. Thus, Sita like the mythological Sita represented an ideal woman according to the Indian concept of traditional woman by sacrificing her talents and aptitudes for the sake of her husband and daughter.

By portraying Mayamma as an incarnation of endurance, Gita Hariharan in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* juxtaposed the fortitude of traditional Indian woman. Mayamma, the old caretaker-cum-governess-cum-cook at Mahesh's house, lived all her life satisfying others. Married at twelve to a useless gambler who came to her every night, "his large hairy thighs rough and heaving on her" (80), she knew no happiness in marriage. When two years of marriage brought forth no child, she incurred the wrath of her mother-in-law, did penance to change the course of her life, invoked the names of all the gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, till she finally gave birth to a male child. Eight years later her husband worn into middle age, with dissipated excess, disappeared taking with him all the money in the house. Though Mayamma never saw him again, she found his replica in their son. A wastrel from birth, he threatened and cursed and even beat his mother till he finally caught fever and died: "The day he died, Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handiwork: now all these had been snatched from her" (82). On that day leaving behind her home forever, Mayamma came to Parvathamma's-Mahesh's mother-house and stayed on to tend to the kitchen and family.

In spite of her own difficult and painful life, in spite of knowing no happiness with her husband and son, Mayamma was able to be a bed-rock to this family. Gita Hariharan indicated the innate strength of the women who was able to bounce back to normalcy in spite of all her tragedies. Mahesh, neither saw nor

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appreciated the enormity of her suffering. In a very offhand manner he brushed it off. “Those days gone and there is no point listening to all her stories about them” (82).

The recollections of Mayamma’s past life provided an insight into her battered, violence-filled existence. While her husband called her “a shameless hussy” (111), and kicked her “after a night of whoring in the rain” (111), her mother-in-law fed her yesterday’s rice because “What is the use of feeding a barren woman” (112) and “smeared the burning red, freshly ground spices into my barrenness” (113) because she was found admiring her new saree. Later, her mother in law asked her to cut her breast open and “take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam” (113) in order to propitiate the gods so as to begot a son. Yet Mayamma never questioned these atrocities, never raised a voice or a finger or tried to run away from this living hell. To her generation of Indian women, life meant merely accepting one’s fate without as much as a murmur of a whimper. According to Devi: “Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand...she snarls and sulks... but she has no bitterness” (135-36). She made no choices in her own life but yet lived through other women like Parvatiamma and later even Devi. In approving of Parvatiamma’s decision to leave her home and family and go in search of the meaning of life, she showed a surprising and indefatigable strength. She helded the family together then and continued to care for Mahesh and his house even when Devi walked out on them. Her life and experiences were totally different from those of Sita who was probably born just fifteen years after Mayamma.

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In the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the mythological stories were told by the grandmother of Devi, when she was a child. In response to the curious child’s queries about the conditions of the women around them, the grandmother usually narrated a story appropriate to the occasion instead of giving a direct reply. The parallels and the mythological equivalents had a profound impact on the mind of Devi. The story of Gandhari was narrated to Devi when she inquired about the veena in her mother’s photograph. When Sita, Devi’s mother came to the house of her in-laws, she had brought a veena with her and used to play on it when she found leisure. Her father-in-law once admonished her for neglecting her duties and questioned whether she was really a wife and a daughter-in-law. In the extended Hindu family, a bride’s position was primarily that of a daughter-in-law and not that of a wife. The in-laws and other family members viewed the newly arrived bride with suspicion even as she grappled with the new situation and tried hard to come to terms with herself in the changed environment.

Sita then hung her head over the veena for a while and then pulled the strings out of the wooden case. This, the grandmother told Devi, was an act of penance on the part of Sita that reminded one of the posture adopted by Gandhari in covering her eyes over with a piece of cloth.

Devi could see the fire cracks in the bridges her grandmother build between the stories she loved and the more sordid stories that were unfolding before her. She asked her grandmother about the fate of Gauri and was promptly told the story of a mythical lady who was married to a serpent and yet led the life of bliss. When Devi enquired about the short lived marital life of Uma, the grandmother narrated the story of Amba. The mythical stories became so much a part of her life that Devi thought she was the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. If at all she was wronged, she thought, she would not take it lying down but instead, she would be the mythical Devi-like avenger. All the same, she thought she was beyond the happenings that took place in the lives of the people around her.

Hariharan showed that all through the ages the society had sustained the same ideal of womanhood by handing down behavioral patterns. But some characters like Sita and Parvatiamma though they were steeped in the Hindu value system, manage to find space and scope for rebellion within the institution they conform to. , In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the concept of womanhood was explained mainly through the characters of Sita, Devi and Mayamma. Among the three, Sita was projected as an embodiment of fortitude, sacrificing all her wishes and tastes for the well being of her husband and daughter. Through the character of Mayamma,

Hariharan had depicted the sufferings and predicaments experienced by women in a patriarchal society. But Devi was different from these two characters. She was forced to accept the traditional norms of society. At first she was abide by the rules but later on she had succeeded in breaking down the fetters that tied up her. They used their state of oppression as a weapon against the very structure that hold them back. This subtle but powerful act of subversion and control made them felt they had their space and power to direct their destiny and even that of others. But in effect they had internalized marginalization and they contributed considerably to the reinforcement of patriarchal values.

To conclude, Gita Hariharan subtly encapsulated the effects of the strong winds of change that had brought about far reaching upheavals in women's lives in India. Hariharan urged that the many disruption of civil society had created opportunities as well as hazards, which simultaneously enabled and constrained Indian woman. To every woman, survival was of paramount importance. The three main woman characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* managed to survive by walking a tight rope or playing a balancing act. Not succumbing to sorrow or despair they did not commit suicide like Anita Desai's protagonist Maya in *Cry the Peacock*. They proved the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival. The parameters of choice had altered tremendously and Devi seemed a beacon light for the modern Indian woman.

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