



Feministic Introspection And The Quest For Self-Identity In Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces Of Night

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Abstract: This article examines Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* using the framework of feministic introspection. Githa Hariharan, Indian woman writer who has been producing a volume of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues and explores the inner world of the woman who strives towards self-realization. Githa Hariharan's very first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* has voiced feminism clearly and attempts to present the reality of the women of today's generation and she reveals the eternal struggle for women's rights and their quest for self-identity in the patriarchal society with three women characters in this novel and they represent the lives of Thousand women in the system of marriage, myth, traditions and loneliness in the lives of married Indian women. By these characters Githa Hariharan explores their striving towards self-realization. This paper focused on illustrating how the female characters in the novel engage in feministic introspection to surpass the constraints imposed by traditional myths, which have historically oppressed and caused them suffering.

Index Terms - Marriage, Oppression, Patriarchy, Self-realization.

I Introduction

Githa Hariharan is one of the women writers who have been producing a volume of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues and explores the inner world of the women who strive towards self-realization. She started her literary career with the publication of her debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), for which she was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993. In this novel, she brilliantly blends myth and legends of India with the contemporary scenario of our Indian women.

The Thousand Faces of Night is her debut novel, which depicts the lives of three Indian women who belong to different generations and their life is crammed with myth and tradition. It also expresses the elements of life as love and death, relationship of men and women and about the clashes of cultures. It tells the story of three women belonging to three different generations namely Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, and their problems in the patriarchal society. The central theme of this novel was the journey of an Indian woman from tradition to modernity in search of self-identity.

As a feminist writer, she depicts feminism through various symbols and it is filled with very sensitive exploration of human relationships planned in a practical manner. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* she has voiced feminism clearly and attempts to present the reality of the women of today's generation and their composite portrait has its own reality. It is not just a feministic novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, removed and retold from a women perspective. It is a novel that presents the true picture of women's status and relation of mythology with patriarchy and feminism. The ultimate goal of feminism is to object the inequalities faced by women in her day to day life.

The Thousand Faces of Night presents the travails of women who crave for love and sympathy but are victims of their own gender. This novel is not just a feministic novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, removed and retold from a women perspective. It is a novel that presents the true picture of women's status and relation of mythology with patriarchy and feminism. The concept which makes Githa Hariharan different from other feminist writers, is the technique of creating characters quite parallel with the mythical characters. Her works mainly articulate on three bases: they are problems of women, basics of Indian Mythology and the lives of three women. The first generation is represented by Mayamma. The second generation is that of Devi's mother Sita and the third generation is that of Devi. Women of all three generations though separated by time have a common level of unrest against the social and cultural doctrines of their male counterparts.

1.1 Rewriting Myths through a Feminist Lens

The Thousand Faces of Night is a feminist writing which represents a variety of women characters and their desires, frustrations and quest for self-identity and portrays them as victims in a male-dominated society. It depicts a single face of thousand lives with the women characters. This novel has the themes of female bonding, marriage, quest for identity, penance and dilemma. The feministic approach is best suited for the analysis of this novel. The aim of feminism theory is to understand gender equality and focuses on the development of women's rights and their desires.

Feministic approach differs from other ways of approach, it is motivated to change the inequality in society and represents the images of women. Feministic introspection is a process of healthy self-reflection and examining the individual analyses and behavior of them. There are two dimensions in the concept of feministic introspection; they are mental state and brain's function. They both are different by their expression; their mental state is known as Introspection. Through feministic introspection of her characters, Githa Hariharan reveals her endeavor in presenting the inner lives and reality of women belonging to today's generation.

1.2 Feminism and Symbolism in the Novel

In this novel, Devi is portrayed as an educated younger generation woman who was in a dilemma whether the culture gives her agony or the other thoughts, she wishes to break the clutches of unhappy marital life. The character of Sita is a middle aged woman with unique characteristics who led her life in a simple way. She wishes to be perfect in her role of life and she voluntarily suppressed her dreams for the sake of being a simple married woman. The another character, Mayamma is old generation women, who stands as an example for all the oppressed and suppressed woman who survive in the world of male dominance by practicing patience and tolerance in her life. All the three women play different roles in different situations but they realize that the man expects woman to be their subordinates. Women are seen as unimportant and secondary because men view them as different and inferior, treating them like objects. This makes women start to see themselves the same way. As a result, men have forced women into lower roles and have controlled them in every situation. Men projected women as subservient creatures. It clearly shows that there is no equal relationship or attitude and presupposition to maintain the social power of men. A woman faces struggles not only in marriage but also from birth, as she experiences dominance for being a girl child and is considered a burden to the family. Marriage becomes one of the major sources of struggle in her life.

"A wife must always be silent, mustn't she?" (TLS)

"The stories of mythical women had not prepared me for the reality of life." (TFN)

In both *That Long Silence* (TLS) by Shashi Deshpande and *The Thousand Faces of Night* (TFN) by Githa Hariharan, the protagonists grapple with societal expectations and the oppressive weight of tradition. It encapsulates Jaya's realization of the societal expectation for women to remain voiceless, suppressing their desires and opinions to maintain familial harmony. Devi's reflection underscores her disillusionment with the traditional narratives that glorify female submission, as she confronts the stark contrast between myth and her own experiences. The protagonists of *That Long Silence* (Jaya) and *The Thousand Faces of Night* (Devi) share striking similarities in their struggles with identity, societal expectations, and the burden of tradition in a patriarchal society. Both women embark on introspective journeys that challenge the silence and submission expected of them.

"A woman can never be herself in this country. She is always someone's daughter, wife, or mother. She never stands alone." (TLS)

It reflects the novel's central theme of women's identity being shaped by societal expectations, which also explores the struggles of Indian women within patriarchal structures. Like Hariharan, Deshpande presents a woman's journey of self-discovery and the conflict between tradition and personal identity. Jaya, the protagonist, mirrors Devi's introspective struggle, making it a fitting comparison.

The central themes in this novel are the struggle of women, the quest for their identity, incompatibility in marriage, and female solidarity. Githa Hariharan emphasizes feminism through her portrayal of complex female characters, depicting their resistance to traditional roles.

This exploration of marriage and identity reflects Simone de Beauvoir's theory of feminism, as outlined in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir critiques the societal perception of marriage as a woman's duty, where domestic work and arranged marriage are framed as sources of pride for the family. Hariharan's portrayal of marriage as a traditional sacrament aligns closely with Beauvoir's insights on women's subjugation within patriarchal systems.

1.3 The Victimization of Women in a Male-Dominated Society

The struggles and predicaments faced by three women characters Mayamma, Sita, and Devi highlight the generational continuity of female victimization in a patriarchal society. Despite belonging to different generations, these women experience similar challenges, reflecting the deep-rooted nature of gender-based oppression. Mayamma, representing the first generation, endures physical violence and remains passive, serving as a model for other women of her generation. She is forced to conform to tradition and cultural norms, which are upheld as universal and unquestionable. Sita, from the second generation, follows these traditions and cultural expectations willingly, aiming to fulfill the role of a typical Indian housewife. Like Mayamma, Sita sacrifices her desires and dreams to satisfy the needs of her family, mentally and physically preparing herself to adhere to traditional rites. Devi, an educated woman from the third generation, does not face physical violence like Mayamma. However, she experiences mistreatment from her husband and his family, as she is subdued and forced to carry out menial tasks, highlighting the persistence of male dominance even in modern settings.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* illustrates how women across generations face similar struggles and predicaments, despite societal changes. Devi, Sita, and Mayamma represent three different generations of women navigating the same oppressive structures. Mayamma embodies the first generation, Sita the second, and Devi the third. Though separated by time, their shared unrest against social and cultural expectations underscores the enduring nature of patriarchal dominance.

Simone de Beauvoir's historical perspective reinforces this theme. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that throughout history, women have been assigned the responsibility of caring for the family, especially during times of war and natural calamities. Men have framed this responsibility as a granted right, masking it as a woman's natural duty. This notion of domination is reflected in how women are often blamed for everything that goes wrong within the household and society. This idea of female responsibility is evident when Mayamma's mother-in-law scrutinizes her closely before finalizing the marriage match, even questioning her about the jewelry she was wearing highlighting how women are commodified and evaluated based on societal expectations.

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 (TFN 80)

From the first generation to the third generation, strict customs are followed in India for women such as "bride-seeing" ceremonies. By Mayamma's ceremony, everyone could visualize what kinds of struggles are faced by women in the male-dominated society. Mayamma is totally examined and questioned by her mother-in-law as the jewels she wears belong to her and even she checks Mayamma's hair whether it is real or not. All these happened to Mayamma at a young age even though she does not understand other questions. The three women characters are Devi, Sita and Mayamma and their lives reflect the lives of thousands of women in an Indian society. The conflicts such as tradition and myth lay on all the characters. In our society, men are considered superior to women and they suppress women in the name of tradition and in the form of marriage.

1.4 The Power of Female Relationships

In Indian society, marriage and motherhood are considered to be the primary duty for women which is assigned by the dominated society and forced women to accept the same by themselves. The three women character's position in this novel is being single, widowed or divorced. It means their life is spent only in solitude. Githa Hariharan's view on solitude does not mean lonely or isolated, it is about one's free space and time to know about Men. This novel shows the female bonding by depicting mother daughter relationship when Devi is in America, she is excited about her friend's relationship with their mother and they chat about their boyfriends and they hug and visit many places. Sita and Devi do not have such a relationship like her friends with their mother but Devi expects such an expression of love from her mother Sita. Devi may fail to get such expression of love from her mother Sita, but when she takes her life changing decision she receives love and support only from her mother. She feels that her life is completed without any influence of male. From Sita and Mayamma, Devi inherits the beauty of female bonding and it gives confidence to lead a life without depending on male. Devi's second coming to her mother Sita, is her final withdrawal from the world of dominance and patriarchal society to stay and lead the life with her mother Sita.

1.5 Choosing Solitude Over Patriarchal Control

The Characters Devi, Sita, and Mayamma navigate societal expectations that prioritize marriage and motherhood as primary duties for women. Their journeys toward self-identity involve embracing solitude not as loneliness, but as a space for personal growth and independence. Devi's return to her mother, Sita, signifies her withdrawal from patriarchal dominance, choosing instead to lead a life defined by female bonding and mutual support. This decision reflects a rejection of traditional male dependence, highlighting the strength found in women's relationships. Similarly, in *Shrayana Bhattacharya's Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh: India's Lonely Young Women and the Search for Intimacy and Independence*, the author explores the lives of Indian women who, despite societal pressures, seek personal fulfillment and autonomy. Through their shared admiration for actor Shah Rukh Khan, these women find a sense of community and empowerment, illustrating the importance of female solidarity in the pursuit of self-identity. Both works underscore the theme that solitude can be a deliberate and empowering choice for women, providing the freedom to define their identities beyond societal expectations.

Finally, the three characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma through their painful life choose the lonely path for their self-identity and she overcomes the struggles through her own free tasks like risk, danger and uncertainty and thinks that women are equal to men in intellectual capability which make her think that women need equality, independence and economic freedom from men. Thus the character Devi chooses the right path of solitude by their modern thinking and takes action which will create the same terms as men.

II Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* ends with an affirmation of the mother-daughter relationship and praises women's bonding, highlighting the strength and resilience women draw from each other. The novel underscores the shared struggles of Mayamma, Sita, and Devi across different generations, emphasizing how women navigate societal expectations and patriarchal dominance. Through Devi's introspective journey and eventual assertion of agency, Githa Hariharan presents a nuanced exploration of female identity, self-discovery, and empowerment. The characters serve as moral examples for other women facing similar oppression, encouraging them to seek strength in solidarity and reclaim their autonomy despite societal constraints.

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