



## QUEST FOR SELF-DISCOVERY IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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### ABSTRACT

*In Indian writing in English fiction has occupied a significant place because of the novelist's vivid portrayal and clear expression of various hurdles and problems faced by the Indian women. The contemporary Indian fiction writers often explore the conflict experience of their protagonist who suffers between tradition and modernity. They also depict how women struggle not only against aggressive male domination but also against the social, cultural and religious oppression prevalent in the modern society. The struggle to lift the curtain of unequal relationship and wipe out the unseen tear from the eyes of woman is the most formidable challenge of our time. Especially the feministic writers examine the marriage bond through their works because of the total transformation of socio-cultural terms.*

*Githa Hariharan one of the leading Indian women writers portrays women who face battles with men and society in her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Hariharan has used the myth and religion to convey the deep-rooted culture of Indian life. The values and tradition of the Hindu society plays a big role in this novel. The three female characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma try to find out their own identity in their own ways. Their expectation is very high about the married life but they receive the unexpected disappointment. This novel reveals the unending fight for their rights and their quest for self identity in the present world. This paper exposes the underworld faces of Indian women's lives and throws light on the emerging womanhood of Githa Hariharan.*

### INTRODUCTION

Gender issues continue to determine the nature and shape of Indian society. In recent years there has been an alarming increase of dowry deaths, sexual violence and harassment of woman, which reveals a large-scale societal breakdown. Woman's position is worsening practically in every sphere and gender issue is basically one that affects woman directly and indirectly. The agony and suffering of women is the subject-matter of a number of writers in the post-modern period. Fiction by Indian women novelists are essentially concerned with the



gender discrimination and other problems related to women who are exposed to both physical and psychological abuse and ill-treatment in the male dominated society.

In Indian Writing in English fiction has occupied a significant place because of the novelist's vivid portrayal and clear expression of various hurdles and problems faced by the Indian women. The contemporary Indian fiction writers often explore the conflict experience of their protagonist who suffers between tradition and modernity. Especially the feministic writers examine the marriage bond through their works because of the total transformation of socio-cultural terms. They also depict how women struggle not only against aggressive male domination but also against the social, cultural and religious oppression prevalent in contemporary society. They also illustrate how legends, myths, orthodox attitudes and traditional beliefs strengthen the picture of the women characters. Contemporary novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Nayantara Sahagal, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Rama Mehta, Kiran Desai and Githa Hariharan tries to bring the pathetic condition of the Indian women and their desperate struggles through their novels to create awareness among the readers. The struggle to lift this curtain of unequal relationship and wipe out the unseen tear from the eyes of woman are the most formidable challenge of our time.

**Githa Hariharan** one of the leading Indian women writers illustrates the value of Indian womanhood and traditional beliefs through the Indian Epic stories drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The feminine characters such as Gandhari, Sita, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika were focused to strengthen her novel **The Thousand Faces of Night** which has won the Commonwealth Booker prize. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan has used the myth and religion to convey the deep-rooted culture of Indian life. This paper is an attempt to study the portrayal of women characters and their quest for self-discovery.

Devi, the protagonist in her childhood days was told mythical stories by her grandmother whenever she rises questions instead of giving a direct reply. Devi's grandmother built fine cracks in the bridge between the stories. Devi's interest in listening this kind of mythical stories slowly built courage in her. Through the mythical stories Devi learned that a woman avenges can earn manhood through her penance. The mythical stories played a powerful role in the thoughts of Devi and she thought that she is the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. She would become the mythical Devi like avenger. She realizes that she was beyond the happenings that took place in the lives of the people around her. Devi's dream-like life comes to an end when she is married to Mahesh, a regional manager in a multi national company. At first Devi admired Mahesh's frank speech. Devi's life can be split into two as before and after marriage. Before marriage when she was in her adolescence, Devi was told stories drawn from the Ramayan and the Mahabaratha by her grandmother. Through the mythical characters she was well informed about the woman's pride, destiny and self sacrifice. While listening to the stories she imagined herself as



*“I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi; I rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons’ heads” (P.No.41).*

Devi’s life is full of disillusionment and she has all along thrived on illusions of womanhood. When she was in America she was disturbed by Dan’s marriage proposal. She attaches herself to men for security. In that case she exoticizes Dan’s interest and affection as a shield to survive in the American campus. She knows very well that because of her inability to conceive a life with him she is highly insensitive in treating him as a fantasy object and a play thing. Her relationship with Dan and her half hearted enjoyment like smoking reflects her impermanence experience in America and her rejection of Dan’s marriage proposal shows that she is having the consciousness that she should not go beyond the traditional values of a Brahmin family. She returned to India and her expectation on marriage should be like a gradual growth from a good sapling. She was much impressed by the open talk of Mahesh and she married him. When she got married Mahesh she realizes that he is too Indian and as well as he sees everything in a business motto including family and wife. Devi discovered that for Mahesh marriage is simply a necessary one in his life and he fulfilled his age factor. He does not want to share anything to his wife except the needs of his body. But for Devi marriage is like a good sapling and it should grow gradually and flourish with sweet moments in her marital life. She didn’t expect such a harassment kind of treatment by her husband. She thought of her mother’s care for her by fulfilling her needs and given her good education at America and as a mother she arranged marriage with Mahesh. Devi at the age of adolescence she was a pet, as well as like Sri Devi for her grandmother, when she was in abroad she was escorted by her boy friend Don, but after marriage she feels that she has lost everything in her life and her subconscious mind direct her to go to her mother for emotional sustenance which will guide her in future. When Devi’s father-in-law went abroad she was left alone and alienation forced her to search for new companionship and she got the friendship of Gopal the musician. She was much impressed by his care towards Devi, his music talents and affectionate words spoken by him. Devi thought of fulfilling her emptiness and to liberate her imprisoned soul as a result she eloped with Gopal. In Devi’s life Gopal is yet another character of exoticism she felt superficial feeling of freedom and she confronts her loneliness and alienation. Mahesh destroys the spirit of Devi, but in Dan and Gopal she merely looks for instant adventure and fulfillment. She fails to connect her views and thoughts with her male partners mentally or emotionally. Devi’s inquisitive spirit prods her from the lethargic material comforts of the life and puts her on the quest for the self-discovery.

Devi’s mother Sita is shown as a middle-aged woman who makes her presence felt in the present narrative through her unique qualities. Though a dark-complexioned lady, she spreads the brightness of her character to enlighten her household. She emerges as a symbol of sacrifice, dogged silence and mute acceptance of the realities of life and after her marriage brought a veena with her and used to play whenever she finds leisure time. One day while she

was playing veena she was scolded by her father-in-law for not responding to the duty assigned by him. Sita's father-in-law emphasized her, the position of bride is to do the things as a daughter-in-law not as a wife. She should not have any refreshment of her own. The in-laws expect that bride should adopt herself with the new environment. He roared like a lion towards Sita for playing veena without completing her household works. He said,

*“Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?”*

*[P.No.30]*

Sita hung her body over the veena for sometime and then she pulled out the strings from the wooden base of the veena. She replied her father-in-law as,

*“Yes. I am a wife. A daughter-in-law” (P.No.30).*

..... She never touched the veena again in her life. Sita's sacrificial life here is compared with Gandhari, the mythical character of the Mahabharatha. Gandhari got married to Dhritarashtra, the prince of Hastinapur. She was much pleased by the warm welcome given by the people of Hastinapur, later she came to know that she was married to a blind man. Because of pride and anger without uttering a single word she tore off a piece of her cloth and tied her eyes tightly. Like Gandhari who tied the eyes to suppress her anger in this novel, Sita too never touched her veena from the very day her husband scolded her. Gandhari's anger was revealed by her as she wrapped a black cloth round her head with the intention not to see the world again as her husband and Sita's anger was revealed by pulling out the strings with the intention of never using that veena in her life again. As a young daughter-in-law of a conservative family, she takes the scolding of her father-in-law to heart and pulls apart the strings of her love for veena. But she channelizes all her strength to become a good wife and mother. She allows her husband to go to Africa and daughter to America for honing their talent and securing a better future. She bears her husband's death most bravely and arranged marriage for her daughter with an educated and well-settled business executive. She cleans and dusts her long-deserted veena to symbolize her possible decision to lead a life as per her own wish and to realize the unfulfilled desires. At last Sita tries to find solace for her troubled heart in music, after getting disillusioned with human beings. She is very conscious of the main current of Indian tradition. She perceives her past with its relevance to the present. She explores various prospects of women in South Indian brahminical society. Sita's experience in her in-laws house can be compared with the poet Kamala Das's childhood experience expressed in one of her poems as

*“ A blue frocked women caused , throwing  
Words at me like pots and pans, to drain  
That honey-colored day of peace.  
‘Why don't you join the others, what*



*“A peculiar child you are!”*”

As the above lines of Kamaladas’s poem “Punishment in Kinder Garten” goes, Sita too suffered the wounds of the words thrown upon her by father-in-law and husband.

Mayamma the third female figure among the feminine trio is married at twelve to a useless gambler and she gained nothing but torture and tears. She was left behind a son who proves to be a complete brute. She does not feel any pain on the death of her son, on the other hand she realizes the deep sense of release. She becomes a trusted servant of Mahesh’s mother Parvatiamma and she shows her ability as a housekeeper, as a cook and as a governess. She sacrifices her life wholeheartedly to the well being of this family. Afterwards she becomes the good friend of Devi and she consoles her during the period of estrangement with Mahesh. Sita feels the touch of her Grandmother while she speaks with Mayamma and she happens to hear some ethics and moral values of life from her as she has heard the stories of epic characters from her Grandmother.

Thus, the three female characters Devi, Sita and Mayamma try to find out their own identity in their own ways. Their expectation is very high about the married life but they receive unexpected disappointment. Devi, the protagonist of this story 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 whose job demands long tours, the death of her father-in-law who was supposed to be a good friend of her and her inability to issue children moves her to elope with Gopal. She destroys the thread of marriage bond that she found Gopal as an ideal companionship to revenge Mahesh. Sita’s married life ends abruptly with the unexpected death of her husband Mahadevan. She bravely faced the society and gave good education to her daughter and she fixes her with a well settled business executive. At last Sita tries to find solace for her troubled heart in music. Sita reacts in her own way to the situation and she performs her role perfectly and shows the strength of her character in the moments of crisis. As Devi travels back to her mother’s home the melodious notes of veena played by her mother after a long term welcome her into the house. It shows her mother’s acceptance of Devi’s final decision of life. Both Sita and Devi break the tradition and enter the world which they believe in. Mayamma’s married life with the useless drunkard man ends in disaster. Thus the three characters suffer and struggle a lot with tears and insecurity out of their marriage. The works of Githa Hariharan carry their special significance in the present scenario. Through her works, she 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. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* she 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 of Githa Hariharan. This also reveals the unending fight for their rights and their quest for self identity in the present world.

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