



Struggle and Self-Realization in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces Of Night*

¹S. Aruna Devi, M. Phil Research Scholar, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi.

²Dr J. Sobhana Devi, Assistant Professor of English, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0551-8338>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203140

Abstract

This paper focuses on the theme of Struggle and Self-Realization in Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night". Githa Hariharan belongs to the new generation of Indian writers who have earned greater visibility and readership for Indian English Literature. She was awarded Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993 for her debut novel The Thousand Faces of Night (1992). Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night" revolves around the story of the lives of the three women Devi, Sita and Mayamma. This theme is revealed through the protagonist Devi. Though she completes her education abroad she remains her traditional background. In her childhood, she listened to many stories from her grandmother. From her grandmother's stories, she realizes that there are no heroines in life, only wives and mothers. Their journey towards identity crisis leads them to realize themselves. Self-Realization depicts the protagonists' life journey.

Keywords: Self-realization, Suffering, Struggle, New identity.

Indian writing in English has acquired a great significance in recent years, not only in India but all over the world. A large number of Indians use the English language as a medium of creative expression. The contribution of Indian women writers especially novelists is really remarkable. Indian Fiction in English has been the most powerful form of literary expression. It has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English Literature.

The early Indian novels in English and the regional languages, under the influence of the myths of the patriarchal society depicted women in the mythical model. These mythical stories were designed to condition woman to her different roles in her family as daughter, wife and mother. In 18th century novels focused on the portrayal of woman in literature. The early 19th century saw the beginnings of a new trend. The first Indian English novel was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* portrayed the sufferings and miseries of the Indian women. All novels focused mainly on the sufferings and sacrifices in the society and in the family.

Indian women writing have focused on the man-woman relationship to describe, analyze and define the Indian women's identity. The first generation of women writers recreated and retold the destiny of Indian women resigned to their condition in a patriarchal society. The recent writers like Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Shoba De, Uma Vasudev have



stressed on the pleasures rather than sufferings of the woman's condition. Their writing retains the man-woman relationship as the pivot of narration. Their women succeed in carving an identity for themselves, defying societal expectations and emerging intact after a cathartic experience, but this self-representation is achieved with reference to the male.

In Indian society the position of woman has always been paradoxical. She has been the key mother figure in the family who is to be revered, but she has still been forced to live a life of slavery, suffering and subjugation. This image of woman is discernible in the works of earlier writers like R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand.

The new growth of self-confidence and self-assertion is perceptible in the women characters of these new writers like Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Raji Narasimhan and Bharati Mukherjee. Their women characters attempt to strive and true to their selves. The existential struggle of these women illustrates the emergence of the new woman on Indian literary scene. Their women lives not merely as a wife, daughter or mother but also as an individual in her own right. The women characters in novels started getting more attention. Women writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur and Shashi Deshpande depicted the woman as an individual, not merely as a member of the family and tried to bring out the conflicts in her mind. Gita Hariharan entered this exclusive group of writers with her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

Githa Hariharan belongs to the new generation of Indian writers who have earned greater visibility and readership for Indian English Literature. She was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. She grew up in Bombay and Manila, and from there she moved to the USA, where she continued her studies and also worked for television channels. After returning to India in 1979, she worked in Mumbai, Chennai and New Delhi, initially as an editor in a publishing house, and later as a freelancer. Now she is working in the faculty of Jamia Milia University, New Delhi as a writer in residence. Hariharan began her writing fiction at the age of thirty.

Githa Hariharan's fiction has been translated into a number of languages including French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Greek, Urdu and Vietnamese; her essays and fiction have also been included in anthologies such as Salman Rushdie. She wrote a monthly column for many years on different aspects of culture and their political and social underpinnings, in *The Telegraph*, Kolkata. As a writer she is preoccupied with human condition. She chooses a small space for almost all her novels but endeavors to enlarge the limited space to such an extent that it becomes an elaborate presentation of human condition.

Githa Hariharan writes five novels and short stories. All her five novels and two books of short stories encompass a variety of themes, although women's lives, storytelling as an articulation of women's silences and her vehement attack on fundamentalism and communalism form the basics of her thematic range. Her emphasis on the articulation of silences and gaps in the lives of her characters, especially women corresponds to her engagement with telling other peoples stories. These stories emerge from the closed recesses of the consciousness of the characters whose voice and presence has been invisible. In telling other peoples stories Hariharan finds an opportunity to give chance to alternative voices.



Memory and fantasy play a vital role in storytelling. *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel* deals with memory. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is conspicuous for both memory and fantasy. The fables in the novel are largely based on fantasy. But her later novels such as *In Times of Siege* and *Fugitive Histories* grapple with medieval and modern history, with communalism and prejudice at their centre respectively.

The thematic range of Hariharan's novels might be limited or narrow but she manages to achieve her goal. She deals with pain, suffering, loss, power, domination and cruelty. She perceives the feelings of compassion and tenderness as a sure remedy to loss. This is apparent from the reading of her novels. Hariharan is aware of writing in English and in Indian languages. Hariharan's emphasis on the articulation of silences and gaps in the lives of her characters especially women corresponds to her engagement with telling other peoples' stories. From these stories she finds an opportunity to narrate the life of varied people to the readers.

The present paper entitled "Struggle and Self-Realization in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*". The novel describes women's struggle and expression of their individuality in the male dominated society. It probes into the problem of women at various levels in the society. Women writers and the women characters to get a new identity they go on their own path. Their journey to the identity at last leads them to the theme of self-realization. Self-realization is to understand or accept the situation around the characters. To define identity the protagonist struggles and failed within the frame work of the male oriented social structures as a wife in an arranged marriage or even as a rebellious lover and finally returns to her mother.

Githa Hariharan's debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) for which she was awarded Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. The novel exemplifies the multiple existences of Indian women in all its complexities. The whole story of the novel is mostly for Devi, who returns from a broad minded environment and who suddenly involves in traditions and ritual surrounding. In her adolescence Devi had listened stories from her grandmother which were drawn from the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Hariharan attaches significance to these mythical stories because from that Indian women draw their role models which focus on pride, chastity, destiny and self-sacrifice. According to Devi's grandmother, Devi is the goddess of a house and she is destined to be accompanied by her good luck in any place she goes. But everything turns out to be the opposite on her part. She takes a flight from all the difficult matters. Later on, she begins to understand that all the female folks- they may be goddesses, princesses or even a common woman, they are forced to bear with difficult situations.

Gita Hariharan has deliberately incorporated the stories of mythical women such as Gandhari, Kunti, Sita, Amba and so on to demonstrate the nature and extent of the influence of myths on the lives of human beings. *The Thousand Faces of Night* fuses myth and fiction to portray a world in which women who are obliged to play male-scripted roles in the society and the family rebel against oppression and injustice and assert freedom, self-dignity and distinct female identity. Hariharan has tried to show how the protagonist imagines herself as a



mythical princess, strays from the sanctity of domestic life, experiences disillusionment, and finally awakes to set her feet firmly on the realistic grounds.

Indian women are always expected to follow the figure of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari. But the noticeable point is that these ideal women existed only in epic, they were princesses and queens and were much far from the pains and sufferings of the woman in the modern world who doesn't even have an identity of her own. She lives for others and breathes for others. In Indian English fiction women are the silent sufferers and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a great change and is no longer presented as a passive character. Women are depicted as an affectionate mother and dutiful wife and servant of their husbands. The female protagonists of the Indian novels are mostly educated, but they are caged within the limits of a traditional society. Their education leads them to think independently. They struggle between tradition and modernity.

The novel begins with Devi's return to Madras from America to live with Sita her mother. Devi is the central and inspiring character. She completes her higher education in America. In America, she had a relationship with the black man named Dan. He even made a marriage proposal to her but she rejects because she realizes her family background which is against to marry another religion. Devi's mother makes sure that Devi's friends were all from good Brahmin families. Her mother calls her to come back to India especially for her marriage. Though she studies in America, she respects her traditional customs and values and always remains her cultural consciousness. Her love for her mother makes her come back to India. Though she was influenced by the modernistic ideas but for her mother wishes she accepts arranged marriage.

In the patriarchal societies, girls are trained in ideal womanhood right from the beginning. This is part of growing as a woman in India. Mothers teach their daughters the womanly qualities. Marriage has always been sacred in India. The role and duty of wives to protect this bond, even if the man is unfaithful towards his wife, it is her duty to bear him, tolerate him and give him support and bliss. It is a traditional family so they decide Swayamvara for Devi's marriage. Devi's mind was instilled by her grandmother's stories, she imagined about a Swayamvara. In Swayamvara, a girl can choose a person on her own. After meeting with five or six bridegrooms, Devi chooses Mahesh as her life partner because she likes his frankness. Mahesh is a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpastes. He stayed with the family members only for ten days a month and the other days he was away from home. Devi accepts his honest. Devi thought that he wants a woman at home to be a wife and a mother to him.

Devi was not prepared for her marriage she accepts it for her mother's wishes. She thought that she chooses an honest man. But after her marriage, she thought that her marriage to a much admired man, Mahesh. He never shares his business matters to her. He never allows her to go to job or learn anything. He came home at least once in a month. Devi lives like a stranger in her own house. His father only gave company to her. Baba tells her quotations in Sanskrit. So she tells him that she wants to learn Sanskrit but he said that it is foolish and the English translation is enough.



Mahesh wants Devi to attend to his father, himself, to manage the housework and to receive his friends well. Mahesh, like all other men of Indian society wants his wife to be a proper wife. Devi's expectations from her husband Mahesh to support her, to endure and understand her on equal grounds never get realized. Even in the house he is busy in his business but he wants a baby. But he is tired in waiting for a baby for no reason and he insists her on having a baby as soon as possible. She does not seem to crave for motherhood. He waits for the news of pregnancy but always heard that there is no news.

Childlessness can leave a woman utterly powerless. It takes a downright chauvinist Mahesh for Devi to be awakened to her own inner need for self-realization. He suggests her to go to the hospital for check up. But Devi is not successful in spite of numerous efforts. Devi wants her life would be protective but Mahesh doesn't care for her. She later understands that she has been unprepared for this phase of life. Devi considers that the total negligence and indifference of Mahesh's attitude is the reason for the failure of her marital life. He goes on tour and travels for weeks together on his business and she longs for his love and affection.

Githa Harihan portrays Devi as a typical Indian wife. She keeps on waiting for him and always remains lonely. Waiting for him turns her life meaningless. The women had no freedom to leave their husband's house or to go back and they had to continue to suffer till destiny took over. In a society where men were convinced that after marriage, the women's services are for the husband, in-laws and the children. Indian culture teaches and trains women to compromise and to sacrifice personal desire for the welfare of the family. For Mahesh marriage is just another necessary milestone of life. Companionship, emotional bonding and intimacy are missing from their relationship and this gives loneliness to Devi. Mahesh is unable to provide her with emotional stability and security. So she decides to leave the house of Mahesh. Her behavior shows that a marriage bond will have meaning only if there is mutual love and respect. Otherwise it would be a mechanical existence. From her grandmother's stories Devi create an image of marriage and life but which is lacks in her real life she moves from them. She always remembers her own cultural and traditional background. So, she sacrifices, cares and endures and trying to adjust initially. Later, She realizes that there is no point in continuing her meaningless life with Mahesh and decides to return home and begin life a fresh. She is confident to survive on her own strength. Survival is the highest ideal struggle for every woman in their life.

On the rebound she enters into a relationship with Gopal, a man of music. He is warm and affectionate and to some extent he is able to provide Devi what Mahesh failed. While Mahesh is having a month-long tour, Devi receives an invitation from one of her neighbours to meet a singer, Gopal. He is a forty years old man. Devi thinks that Gopal's music can help her forget the bitter experiences of life. The music of Gopal is a symbolic call for confrontation of oneself. Devi believes that Gopal could provide all excitement. After Gopal comes into her life she feels her suppressed dreams leap into flames and she walks out of wedlock courageously. Gopal considers her as his inspiration and supports for his life. She is



happy with Gopal because her happiness is concern. He takes her with his concert tours, shares his professional plans with her. She is gradually drawn to the music of Gopal

Despite of this entire Devi feels alienated because she feels she does not belong to his world. Even with him she soon realizes that it was just an infatuation. He is like a dancing peacock too engrossed with himself. There is lack of mental and emotional incompatibility in both her relations which disrupts the bonding tie. Though she belongs to the traditional background she cannot do something that can match up with the mythical women. Gopal can only fulfill her temptations. Gopal turns out to be a flirt with ambitions of an aristocratic way of life. Devi is disappointed and then she decides to leave Gopal as she had earlier left Mahesh.

Finally Devi makes a choice of coming back to her mother to start a new life. At the end of the novel, the soft sound of the veena played by her mother. The inviting call of veena to Devi suggests new relationship with her mother. Sita symbolically welcomes her daughter. It is a sign of confidence and a feeling of the youthful days by removing the traces of the past and welcoming the present for constructing a future.

In the title of the novel, a significant word, 'night' symbolizes the life of females because their sufferings and sacrifices and 'Thousand Faces' through the description of different female characters with their different types of sufferings. It is shown that the females take birth on this earth only to do sacrifices for others especially for their male relatives. The manner life cannot be judged in advance. The protagonist Devi encounters the problem of alienation, footlessness and identity crisis.

In a very distinct manner, the novelist gives an image of the dangerous situations of wives in our country, India. The fundamental concern here is the incapability of emotions of the Indian husbands and lack of concern of the mental state of their wives. Gita Hariharan's main purpose is to make the readers especially the males aware of having a thought and feeling of knowing their partners thoroughly. She also discusses how a woman is generally considered to be in India.

The mythological stories provide a powerful link between generations of women. The protagonist struggles all through her life. She was running away from America, the house on Jacaranda Road, Mahesh and Gopal. She had been living as a weak woman. She has allowed others to treat her as a puppet and they pulled her strings. She realizes that she has made very few choices in her life to write off the male scripts. Devi returns to give her love to her mother. At the final part of the story she controls herself and she mentally prepares herself to face the challenges of life with the help of her mother Sita. As a responsible mother she performs all her duties and responsibilities and she is even ready to welcome her daughter again.

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* Devi, from her life journey she get many experiences, failures, identity crisis and the realization of self. Her self-realization is linked with her desire to represent things in her way, to construct her own language and her own expression. She struggles and suffers in her entire life. To create a positive identity she has to look for a different order of meaning in the colorful garden of female imaginary. This



is symbolically represented by her re-entry into her mother's garden. The lack of emotion from her husband which makes her to feel loneliness and her mother's welcoming music back to her home makes her time for self-realization.

From her grandmother's stories of the heroic women, self-sacrificing heroines and women turns to men, Devi realizes that she can relate neither to the aggressive model nor to be the benevolent model of femininity. Devi creates a different destiny for herself as she seeks to find a renewed meaning to her relationship with her mother. Sita who has been urging Devi to view life her way and conform is in search of new ways. There can be as many routes to self-realization as there are people who follow their own way not limiting the experience. Sita, renewing her long lost relationship with her discarded veena is a significant step towards inner healing. The inviting call of veena that Devi hears suggests renewal of a new, positive relationship with the self and the daughter and the renewal of life itself. The end of the novel marks the beginning of such a meaningful joint pursuit with separate independent goals and values.

References

- [1] Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. India: Penguin Random House, 1992.
- [2] Jadhao, Nitin. *Indian English Literature*. Delhi: Kanpur, 2012.
- [3] Kala.A "Flying in New Skies: Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*: A Feminist Perspective".*Critical Essays on Diasporic Writings*. K.Balachandran. New Delhi: Arise Publishers, 2008.
- [4] Kaushik, Abhu Shukla. "Changing Faces of Indian Woman: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature Redefining the self*. Malti Agarwal. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2011.
- [5] Keisham, Ragini. "Thwarted Dreams of Women in their Constant Life: *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Post Colonial Trend Women's Issues and search for identity in the novels of Githa Hariharan*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2014.
- [6] Mangayarkarasi, K. "The Theme of Marital Incompatibility in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Wonders and Splendours in Indian Fiction in English*. P.Gopichand and P.Nagasuseela. Jaipur: Aadi Publishers, 2013.
- [7] Ravi, Srilata. "In the Name of the Mother: A Feminist Reading of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Indrani Aikath Gyaltzen's *Daughters of the House*. *50 Years of Indian Writing: Golden Jubilee Volume*. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Indian Association for English Studies, 1999.
- [8] Sharma, G.R. *Indian Writing in English*. (Views and Reviews) New Delhi: Swastik Publications, 2013.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil



Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution4.0 International License.