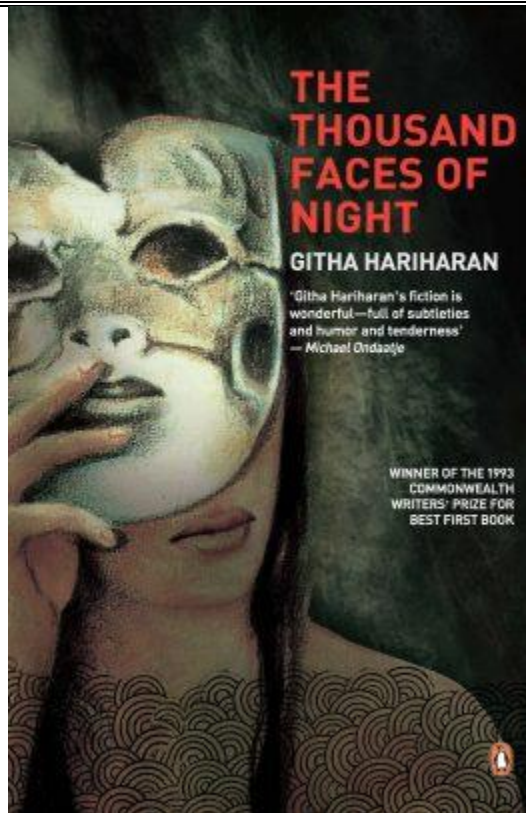


**Myth and Reality in Githa Hariharan's
*The Thousand Faces of Night***

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Abstract

The Thousand Faces of Night articulates the problems of women, the basics of Indian mythology, the lives of the three women, Devi, Sita and Mayamma. This novel is not just a feminist novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewrote and retold from a female point of view. The focus of this novel is on the inner life of woman, the inner spaces are reflected in detail.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, feminist fiction, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, **mythology**, inner life of Indian women

Githa Hariharan



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Githa Hariharan is an Indian author and editor based in New Delhi. She studied BA in English from University of Mumbai and MA in Communication from Fairfield. She had worked in the public broadcasting system in New York. Her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, won the Commonwealth writers prize in 1993. She has also published a collection of short stories entitled *The Art of Dying* and two novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* 1994, *When Dreams Travel* 1999. She has published an anthology of Indian short stories translated from four major south Indian languages. Githa Hariharan is one of the women writers who have been producing a body of Indian literature that is committed to feminist and social issues.

Focus on Female Subjectivity

She has started her career as a writer by attempting to write on a subject that was close to heart to many writers, that is the female subjectivity. She portrays the changing image of woman in the modern and the post modern era. Tradition, transition and modernity are the three stages, which the women in Hariharan's novels pass through. Like any other Indian who is raised on oral narratives and the epics, learnt at the grandmother's knees, Hariharan too grew up on tales and

myths. She has used these myths to help examine contemporary women's lives in her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

Depiction of Indian Social System – Falling Back to Old Customs

Indian society is traditional and caste based and Githahariharan has carefully showed Indian Social system and has depicted the patriarchic system in her first novel. The novel is woven around three generations of women Devi, Sita, Mayamma. The novel brings the idea how despite the generation, background and the education that an Indian woman attains, her fate is to fall back into the century old customs at least to a small extent.

Devi – The Protagonist

The protagonist of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is Devi. When Devi returns from her education in America, tradition and the old order of things are ready to reclaim her into an arranged marriage as she gets exasperated with her pompous husband Mahesh, she learns the vital duty of any Indian wife, pretends to be a good wife, pretends to love entertaining her husband's family and friends.

She comes to Madras with the memory of her black American lover, Dan. She is the central character and neither is an ideal women like her mother Sita, nor is she spiritually superior as her mother- in-law. Devi learns the vital duty from her old family retainer Mayamma, who got married when she was a girl to a drunken husband and abused by mother- in-law, husband as well as her own son. She advices Devi that the key to marriage is the eblity to endure and go on.

Sita

And Devi's mother Sita follows this theory in her life. She sacrifices herself to the Gods of reason, order and progress. All through her life, she fulfills the role of a dutiful daughter and wife and dutiful mother.

Personal Desires and Ambitions

Devi is an ordinary woman, an educated modern Indian woman who is prone to desires and ambitions in the society of her own times. She takes a controlled status of a wife in married life and does not make a compromise with her biological and emotional needs. She is ready to reach adjustment with a sense of loss when she decides to stay with her mother. She refuses an offer of marriage from her African-American friend Dan because of her ambivalence towards American culture. Dan and Devi are different in terms of their beliefs, culture and traditions.

Sita leads her daughter to the altar of marriage, she agrees to a negotiated marriage like a good Indian girl. Before their marriage, openly said to Devi about his nature of work and informs that his father and maid servant will be there.

Mahesh and Devi – Mythological Models to Follow

Mahesh wants Devi in his family to manage the housework and to receive his friends well. She is unable to defend against Mahesh's supreme confidence and whenever she expresses a wish to do something like learning to play cards so that she can be with him. According to Mahesh, education is not needed in the making of a woman. Her grandmother was a very happy woman without education. Devi understands that Mahesh needs a woman who is subservient and obedient. Devi listens to the mythological stories from her grandmother that have initiated her into the numerous possibilities of womanhood. Her grandmother always told mythological stories to her granddaughter.

These stories became so much a part of her life that Devi thinks she is the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. Marriage to Mahesh and his indifferent behaviour bring an end to the dream-like life of Devi. It is the physical, psychological and emotional intimacy that provides the temper and tenor for Devi's initiation into the world of women.

Three Women

The three women belong to different generations and are different in terms of education and social circumstances. Mayamma can't bear a child for several years. Her husband and

mother-in-law have tortured her physically, Sita's troubles are more mental and Devi's troubles are due to her husband's indifferent attitude.

Represents Cross-sections of Society

Indian customs, traditions, rituals and superstitions are woven into a rich literary fabric with a plentiful of ancient myth and not so ancient allusive stories. At the end of the novel, Devi returns to her mother and she aims to make a fresh beginning. She doesn't know what will happen in future.

In this novel, characters truly represent various cross sections of Indian society.

Stories Told

The relation between myth or stories and women is depicted in the *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The female point of view differs from the male discourse when we consider myths in relation to Mahabharata. The story is the portrayal of different faces of women suffering different kinds of suffering. It articulates the problems of women with the help of Indian mythology. The author presents the Indian myth taken from Ramayana and Mahabharata and relates to the women characters of her novel.

As a young girl, Devi curiously tries to know the mystery of life through the stories told by her grandmother, she recollects her grandmother's story of Damayanthi that was taken from the Mahabharata. Damayanthi's father decided holding her swayamvara, she was brave and determined to espouse Nala, the brave virtuous king. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral "A woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning". From this story Devi establishes the concept of swayamvara.

The next story narrated by her grandmother is about Gandhari who plays a significant part in the Mahabharata. In this story Devi's grandmother says she embraced her destiny a blind husband with a self- sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. Devi acclaims, the lesson brought me five steps close to adulthood.

Another significant story told by her grandma is the story that story deals with the beautiful girl who married a snake. Although Devi's immature mind cannot decode the real purpose in this story, it etched in her memory as a story throughout her life. Baba (her father-in-law) narrates some stories about womanhood, and the wifely vows and duties in a household and he teaches Devi what Brahminhood consists of. When she heard her grandmother's stories she is confident between a position of acceptance and resistance.

Modern Forms of Patriarchy

Through grandmother's and Baba's stories Githa Hariharan examines how modern forms of patriarchy draw on the ancient diktats such as the strategic use of myth. Baba asserts a patriarchal dominance when he speaks in a knowledgeable and direct manner. This contrasts with grandma's more convoluted and less definitive versions of myth. In the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa's use of myth illustrates how it continues to endorse a dominant ideology through stories and allegories of selflessly elevated women but it also creates spaces in which the traditional mythology offers the possibility.

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