

**New Paradigms for Women's Identity in Githa Hariharan's  
*The Thousand Faces Of Night***

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**Abstract**

Identity presupposes the acceptance of individuality. It is to have the right over the body and mind. Society as such is a collection of individuals who are free, independent and willing to come together to form a society. As Indian society is a patriarchal one, women do not have this kind of identity because they were not treated as individuals. According to Simone De Beauvoir, in the patriarchal system, the woman is:

Defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute- she is the Other. (16)

This work looks closely at *The Thousand Faces of Night* published by Githa Hariharan which takes a gender centered platform. In this analysis, the author tends to look primarily for ways in which Hariharan's narrative deconstruct binary oppositions underlying mainstream assumptions about identity, culture and sexuality. *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a variety of female characters, with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony, searching for self-identity or self-liberation. Hariharan's female characters revolt against considering marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals of an 'ideal woman.' They truly represent contemporary Indian women who are bringing about a silent revolution. Here, they stand with the third wave of feminism strongly advocating individual liberation. Issues raised by Hariharan are social, cultural and ethical. The vision Hariharan has for womankind is of empowerment. The protagonist finally disowns her status of 'other' finally to return to her mother or her roots to rediscover her true identity.

**Keywords:** Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces Of Night*, Identity, culture, sexuality, liberation, myth, ideal woman, feminist theories.

Commonly observed behavioural traits associated with women and men are not caused by biology, rather, they are culturally learned or acquired. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that determines this creature. (295)

To counter the biological determinism, feminists have argued that behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological causes. As Beauvoir states, “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (5). Existentialism proposes that one exists first, and through one’s acts, one becomes something. She reasoned that an individual has absolute control over her fate, and neither society, nor organized religion should limit our freedom to live authentically. But since men have claimed the category of self, of subject, for themselves, women are relegated to the status of the ‘Other’. Consequently, the category of women has no substance except as an extension of male fantasy and fears. And since all cultural representations of the world around us have been produced by men, women must ‘dream through the dream of men’. Thus, a woman is required to accept her status of other, ‘make herself object’ and ‘renounce her autonomy.’ Simone de Beauvoir has developed the concept of woman as ‘the Other’, who does not fit in the paradigm of men. In her revolutionary book, *The Second Sex*, she mentioned.

the situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures- nevertheless finds herself living in the world where men compel her to assume the status of the other (29).

The feminist movements in the west had some influence on the women's movement in developing countries like India. Yet, feminism as it exists today in India, has gone beyond its western counterparts. About the position of women in east Anand K. Coomaraswamy states

... the oriental woman is what she is, only because our social religious culture has permitted her to be and to remain essentially feminine. Just as the diagnosis has to be our, so must the prescriptions be. Whatever works towards the empowerment of women in the West may not necessarily succeed in our context. (101)

In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels abroad. Indian woman writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. Today, the works of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Shashi

Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. As Patricia Meyer Specks remarks:

There seems to be something that we call a women's point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries. (37).

The plight of women is similar throughout irrespective of religion and class. Economically, women might not be equal to men, socially they are deprived of power and culturally they are not given similar treatment.

Through the study of women characters in her novels, Githa Hariharan provides us with a peek into the Indian tradition and culture and the position of women in the Indian society. It is about the journey of Indian women through tradition to modernity in search of self-identity. It also discusses the ways out. It tells us how the characters, mythological and modern cope with passive victimhood. *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a variety of female characters, with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony, searching for self-identity or self-liberation. Hariharan's female characters revolt against considering marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals of an 'ideal woman'. Here, they stand with the third wave of feminism strongly advocating individual liberation. Issues raised by Hariharan are social, cultural and ethical. The vision Hariharan has for womankind is of empowerment.

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* is woven around three generations of women-Devi, Sita and Mayamma. It brings forth 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 if not more to a small extent. All these, women are connected by their quest for identity, unhappy marriages and disgruntled ambitions. They all symbolize the endless struggle of womanhood. Through these feminine characters, Hariharan attempts to highlight their individual position in this society, their encounter with bitter realities and their reactions to those circumstances. While presenting it she subtly displays their individual quest for identity.

Sita, Devi's mother, emerges as a symbol of sacrifice, dogged silence and mute acceptance of the realities of life. As a young daughter in law of a conservative family, she gives up the dream of becoming an accomplished veena player. She channelizes all her strength to become a good wife and mother. When her husband, Mahadevan leaves for Africa, she looks after the household to the best of her abilities. She endures Mahadevan's death in the most stoic manner. She gets Devi married with a well settled boy, Mahesh. But Devi's unexpected elopement with Gopal shatters her emotionally. Since then, she decides to live for herself and try to fulfil the motto of her life

‘being the ideal woman’. She cleans her veena which symbolizes her decision to live life as per her own wishes and to realize her unfulfilled desires.

Devi, the protagonist, undergoes an identity crisis, even after following the norms set by the society. She constantly faces the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, dilemma of cultures western versus eastern, dilemma of mind (knowledge) versus heart (true knowledge) and dilemma of being a ‘good girl’ versus ‘bad girl’. Devi plays the role of (objectified) suave young charmer in Dan’s life, host and homemaker waiting for her husband, Mahesh who comes home as a guest, and a muse for Gopal, the musician. She is unable to imagine herself complete in any of these roles. She realizes that all the three men in her life- Dan, Mahesh and Gopal had their own identities and she was expected to fuse herself in their identities. The Hindu society in which she grew up demanded her to be a virtuous woman and a ‘good girl’ to merge herself with the identity of the man in her life. She has a problem when she becomes aware that men rule the world, in a patriarchal society like India. So, she leaves her husband and boyfriend and violated “the law of threshold” (Lal 12). She also finds that here, in India, females are raised in the world with different expectations. As soon as Devi realizes this, she promptly comes out of it, to find her own identity and individuality.

Mayamma is the old caretaker in Mahesh's house. She got married at a very early age at twelve, that too, to a large family with a useless drunkard. Her cruel mother-in-law blames Mayamma for not conceiving. Finally, she gives birth to a child after ten years of long struggle. Eight years later, her husband disappears by taking all the money from the house. If the tortures meted out to her were not enough, even her son proves to be nothing better than an animal. Thus, Mayamma appears to be a victim of fate. Her son’s death releases Mayamma from all emotional and ethical bonds and propels her to create a new place for her. She devotes herself to her new master and wants to be treated with love and dignity as a human being.

Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of husband or children and felt safer in these confined relationships. This very confinement has made them slaves as they have taken shelter and dependence in them, whether it is Mayamma, Sita or Devi. They are the victims, the losers at the hands of patriarchal structure. Hariharan's women characters are trapped between traditions, old values, myths and modernity and have become the victims of gross gender discrimination of male dominated society. Baba, Devi's father- in- law says

The housewife should always be joyous adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does. (*The Thousand Faces of Night* 71)

Githa Hariharan is presenting women in challenge against their conditioning and predicaments to get own choice and self. It is advocated to break conventional relation and

maintain a reciprocal relationship between man and woman. She agrees completely with feminist ideologies and supports and suggests a changed system where women have greater control of their lives. She advocates individual rights and freedom over their body. However, questions have been asked and alternatives have been suggested. The silent revolution has begun. Within a few years the quest for self will become the quest of the nation where the myths would be re-written, and the rules of the power-game and society will be changed.

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