

**Portrayal of Women in Githa Hariharan's Novels:
*The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams Travel***

K. G. Maheswari, M.A., M.Phil.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **Vol. 13:9** **September 2013**



Githa Hariharan

Courtesy: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~montfell/biographies/g_n/hariharang.html

Githa Hariharan, a Leading Fiction Writer in Indian Writing in English

Githa Hariharan is one of the most prolific woman writers of India. She was born in Coimbatore in 1954. She was brought up in Bombay and Manila and got her education in these two places besides the U.S.A. She has been an editor, first in a publishing house and then as a freelancer. Githa Hariharan is also a social activist known for her care and concern for women. In 1995, she challenged the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act as discriminative in the Supreme Court of India and was accorded victory.

The Works of Githa Hariharan

The works of Githa Hariharan include novels, short stories, articles, columns and also the essays of different topics that interest her. Githa Hariharan published her first novel *The*

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Thousand Faces of Night in 1992 and was awarded the Commonwealth writer's prize in 1993. This novel was followed by *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994). Her third novel *When Dreams Travel* appeared in 1999 and it was quickly followed by *In Times of Siege*(2003). Her latest publication is *Fugitive Histories* which appeared in 2009. Besides novels, Githa hariharan has also authored a collection of short stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993), and books of short stories for children, *The Winning Team* which came out in 2004. *A Southern Harvest* (1993)is a collection of short stories from south India translated by Githa Hariharan.



Focus of This Paper

The study deals with “*Portrayal of Women in Githa Hariharan’s novels: The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams Travel*”.

The first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* describes the setup of a central south Indian Brahmin family. Devi, the central character returns to Madras from America to live with her mother, Sita. Initially, she is confronted by some difficulties in making adjustments with day-to-day realities. It was difficult to change the old order with her radical ideas, though she came from a brave new world. Her dream-like visit to America ends as soon as she is in India. Devi prepares to live for and support her widowed mother and is soon sucked back into the maternal love. Sita was always and is still Devi’s anchor rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of her existence. She believed most in the power of her own magic. Sita made discrete

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inquires and made thorough investigations of all candidates before Devi's marriage. What Sita thought to be a suitable marriage for her daughter, failed on various levels, Devi had some expectations from her husband Mahesh to support and understand her on emotional grounds, but her expectations were never realized.

She finds a good friend in Mayamma, the old family retainer in the house. Devi listens to her life experiences with all attention and care: she tries to draw some useful essence from them in order to make her life a little better than what Mayamma had allowed occurring in hers. She blamed all and everything on herself, never complaining because she felt that the success of life for a woman depended on her ability to endure and move on in this male dominated society. Devi's father-in-law, through his discovery, equips her with a philosophy to live with, "Devi, he chided. whatever is depended on others is misery, whatever rests on oneself is happiness".

Mayamma consoles and comforts her. Devi contemplates, "loneliness is a good teacher almost as efficient as Mayamma's penance". *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a novel of three women - Sita, Devi and Mayamma who "walked on tight rope and struggled for some balance, for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves." They represent three different generations and more than thousand faces of women in India who still have no better existence than night.

Mayamma, illiterate and unaware is the greatest sufferer. Many like her have to idea as to what they really want to be. Sita is a middle-aged woman whose lot is better than Mayamma's, since she dominates the family because of her knowledge of her surrounding and awareness of herself; In her desire to become a good wife and perfect daughter, as a result of which she faces a sense of discomfiture and futility. Devi is representative of the present day intellectual woman, but she too fails, confronts loneliness and alienation. Unable to understand imponderable man-woman relationship. She feels that she has an ephemeral existence. *The Thousand Faces of Night* ends convincingly as Devi returns home after experiencing the world which she realizes is filled

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with sound and fury, signifying nothing. This makes the book an interesting reading and also thought-provoking.



Githa Hariharan's next novel is *When Dreams Travel*. The novel is a retelling of the old story of Shahrzad and her sister Duniyasad. They are married to two brothers, the sultan Shaharyar and Shahzaman, both of whom were earlier cuckolded by their wives. To prevent this from happening again, the sultan marries a virgin each night, and then beheads her in the morning. This grisly practice continues until Shahrzad, the Wazir's daughter, manages to keep death at bay by telling him stories for a thousand and one nights. There are only two other characters who count: Dilshad, an insolvent and wily slave girl who betrays the Sultan by helping his son Umar to Usurp the throne, and Satyasama, a freak from the sultan's Harem, whose body is covered with a sleek, lightweight fur. All these characters have a dream-like quality as though they exit in a trance. Early in the story Shahrzad dies mysteriously and much of the book concerns Duniyasad's efforts to find out how and why. The truth is revealed only in the last chapter's surprise ending. The deaths of Shahrzad and Shahzaman and the wazir by no means preclude their frequent reappearances, either in dream sequences or in incidents from the past.

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Githa Hariharan demonstrates her control of the fictional craft in the book's carefully-planned structure. It is divided into two parts; the first unfolds the story of the four main characters: the second is a contrapuntal series of tales told by Dunyazad and Dilshad during their seven-day sojourn in the desert. In the major players are participants in some gory and grotesque happenings. They include accounts of a limbless, headless monkey-woman who refuses to die: a pool full of dismembered female body parts, an endless manor built by two brothers, a woman who feeds the hungry with her breasts, and more in this vein. Some of these tales are drawn out to inordinate lengths. A few are puzzling, if not downright pointless. Finally the thought strikes us that if this was the kind of pointless, foolish stories Shahrzad told Shaharyar night after night, her head might one day well have rolled like those of the virgin brides before her. Thus, Githa Hariharan depicts how women are oppressed in the Indian society as portrayed in these novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*

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