

RIGEO



ISSN: 2146 - 0353

Review of International GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION



www.rigeo.org

Reclaiming the Female Voice: Myth and Identity in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

¹ A. Deborah Joicy & ²Dr. S. Vennila

¹Reg. No. 19121244012008, Research Scholar,
Sarah Tucker College, Perumalpuram
Email Id: joideborah@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor of English,
^{1&2}Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, 627 012,
Tamil Nadu, India.
Email Id: vennila@tjells.com

Received: 10/10/2021

Accepted: 20/11/2021

Published: 09/12/2021

Abstract

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* explores the struggles of women within traditional Indian society. The novel questions patriarchal values that expect women to accept marriage, sacrifice, and family responsibilities without protest. This paper examines how Hariharan uses myth, memory, and storytelling to present women's experiences and their search for identity. The stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damayanti, and other mythical women become closely connected with Devi's own life. Through her grandmother's stories, Devi learns about different forms of womanhood, suffering, courage, and resistance. However, she does not accept these traditional stories passively. She questions them, reinterprets them, and connects them with the lives of contemporary women. The experiences of Devi, Sita, Mayamma, and other women reveal the conflict between tradition and modernity. Devi's unhappy marriage, emotional isolation, and search for freedom gradually lead her towards self-awareness. The paper argues that Hariharan reworks traditional myths from a feminist perspective and uses them to give women a voice of their own. Myth therefore becomes not only a link with the past but also a means of questioning patriarchy and creating new possibilities for female identity. The study concludes that Devi's journey from dependence and confusion towards self-realisation represents the larger struggle of women to reclaim their voices, question social expectations, and define their identities on their own terms.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Identity Crisis, Multiple-Dimensions, Mother-

Daughter Relationship, Myths.

Githa Hariharan uses flashback and first-person narration effectively in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Through Devi's memories, the stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damayanti, Gauri, and the woman who marries a snake become closely connected with her own life. The stories told by Pati, Mayamma, and Baba are not simply memories of the past; they help the reader understand Devi's present experiences. Myth and memory therefore work together throughout the novel and prepare the reader for the struggles that Devi faces in her married life. Hariharan also explores the relationships that connect members of a family. The story of Lakshmiamma, whose son lives in the town and gradually stops visiting her and sending money, presents another example of emotional and economic neglect. Left helpless and poor, she is advised to remain patient: "Patience Lakshmiamma, they said sagely. Money is not that easy to come by these days." (125) Through Lakshmiamma's experience, Hariharan shows the difficulties faced by women who become dependent on their children in later life.

Devi's emotional life is central to the novel. Although she performs different roles as a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mistress, her feelings are rarely understood or valued. Her mother prefers Mahesh for her marriage even though Devi has feelings for Dan. After marriage, Mahesh fails to understand her emotional and intellectual needs. He does not encourage her interest in Sanskrit, rejects her wish to work as a research assistant, and does not respond even to her simple desire to spend time with him. His attitude shows that he understands marriage mainly as a social duty rather than as a relationship based on love, companionship, and mutual understanding.

Devi's experience of marriage is represented through the powerful image of a knife. She feels that marriage is a form of sacrifice that causes continuous emotional pain: "I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, the passion of sacrifice whole, all-encompassing." (54) Yet this suffering does not destroy her completely. Her inner self remains untouched: "The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for." (54) Her education in America has also not prepared her for the emotional realities of married life. She admits, "My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood." (54) These words reveal the gap between education and the social expectations placed upon women.

Mahesh's inability to understand Devi is also connected with his own childhood. He loses his mother when he is young, while his father, Baba, experiences loneliness after his wife's departure. Baba may be successful as a Sanskrit professor, but he fails to understand the emotional needs of his own family. Mahesh repeats this pattern in his own life. Although he is successful in his profession, he fails to provide emotional support to Devi. His professional success therefore contrasts with his failure as a husband.

Devi gradually feels imprisoned in her marital home. Like a caged bird, she is physically restricted, but her imagination remains free. Whenever she experiences loneliness and frustration, she enters a world of fantasy. In her imagination, she becomes powerful and independent. This fantasy world becomes a form of escape from the limitations of her real life. Hariharan uses Devi's imagination to reveal her hidden desires and her wish to become a woman who can control her own destiny. When Devi's difficulties continue, Mahesh takes her to a gynaecologist because of concerns about her fertility. The doctor's suggestions cannot solve the deeper emotional problems in the marriage. Devi remains lonely and frustrated. Mayamma, who has experienced suffering throughout her own life, advises Devi to endure her difficulties. However, Devi does not completely accept Mayamma's belief that suffering is necessary for a successful marriage.

Silence becomes Devi's constant companion in her husband's house. This silence is broken by the music of Gopal, a neighbour and Hindustani classical singer. Devi is attracted to his music and affectionate attention because they provide an emotional connection that is missing in her marriage. She begins to see Gopal as an escape from her loneliness. Her relationship with him eventually leads to her leaving Mahesh. However, Gopal does not provide the permanent happiness she expects. Devi gradually understands that moving from one relationship to another cannot by itself give her a complete identity.

Devi finally leaves Gopal and returns to her mother, Sita. This return is important because it represents a movement towards self-understanding rather than defeat. She has experienced marriage, loneliness, fantasy, and emotional confusion, and these experiences help her understand what she wants from life. The music of Sita's veena provides her with a quiet sense of comfort and belonging. Unlike the imaginary victories of her fantasy world, Devi's final achievement is an inner victory. She begins to understand that her identity cannot depend entirely on her husband, lover, family, or traditional expectations. Hariharan presents Devi's

journey as a movement from dependence and confusion towards self-awareness. Through mythology, memory, fantasy, and personal experience, the novel explores the difficulties faced by women within patriarchal family structures. Devi's return to her mother does not represent failure; rather, it marks the beginning of her search for an identity of her own. The novel ultimately suggests that true freedom comes when a woman learns to understand herself, question imposed roles, and make her own choices.

Mythology plays an important role in Devi's childhood and imagination. The stories told by her grandmother give her a space to question, imagine, and understand life differently. Even when she prepares for her *swayamvara*, Devi remembers the stories she heard from Pati. These memories connect her childhood experiences with her adult life. Through these stories, Hariharan shows how cultural traditions and myths can influence a woman's understanding of identity, marriage, relationships, and womanhood.

Devi does not simply receive direct advice from her grandmother. Instead, the stories encourage her to think for herself. Beginning with the *swayamvara* of Damayanti and continuing through different myths and legends, Pati's stories gradually shape Devi's ideas about marriage, courage, suffering, and identity. Her childhood visits to her grandmother's house provide her with a world that is different from her ordinary life with her mother. Devi remembers, "We lived ordinary lives most of the year, in a house Amma filled with her mottoes, the words I heard most often from her as I was growing up: order, reason, progress. But every summer, we lived another life with my grandmother." (26) This contrast between Sita's world of "order, reason, progress" and Pati's imaginative world of stories becomes important in Devi's development.

The stories also help Devi look at the women around her in a new way. She discovers an old photograph of her mother and begins to understand that Sita had a life and identity beyond being simply her mother. Sita herself represents a woman who carries many responsibilities within the family. Through Sita, Hariharan shows the complex roles traditionally expected of women as daughters, wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and mothers-in-law. The grandmother also believes that myths are closely connected with real life, although she sometimes finds it difficult to find heroic mythical examples for the ordinary experiences of people around her. Devi explains, "In my grandmother's mind, the link between her stories and our own lives was a very vital one. But she could not always find a precise mythological equivalent for the puzzling experiences the people we knew had. The lesser lives we knew did not always rise to the heroic

proportions of my mother's versions of Gandhari's sacrifice." (30) This shows the difference between the heroic women of mythology and ordinary women whose struggles often remain unnoticed.

Hariharan uses mythology as an important feminist technique. She does not simply repeat traditional stories; instead, she places them beside the experiences of contemporary women. The story of the beautiful girl who marries a snake is one such example. The girl accepts the marriage because she has been taught that marriage is a duty that cannot easily be rejected: "A girl is given only once in marriage." (33) Devi connects this story with the life of Gauri and begins to question the meaning of marriage and the suffering experienced by women. She asks, "I remember I spent days trying to unravel this message from my grandmother. Should Gauri, my happy, down-to-earth Gauri, have married a snake? And who was the snake in her story-her bestial husband or her freakish'lover?" (34) Her questions show that Devi is not a passive listener. She tries to understand the deeper meaning of the stories and relate them to real women's lives.

The stories have a strong psychological effect on Devi because she hears them when she is young. Whenever she faces confusion or difficult questions, she returns to the world of myths and legends. As Pati grows older, her stories become increasingly imaginative. One of the most important stories is that of Amba, whose character represents resistance and revenge. Devi does not merely listen to this story; she enters its imaginary world and transforms herself into a powerful woman: "I lived a secret life of my own; I became a woman warrior, a heroine, I was Devi, I rode a tiger and cut off the evil magical demons' heads" (41) Through mythology, Devi creates an alternative identity for herself. She imagines herself as a warrior who has the strength to fight evil and protect herself and others.

Devi's imagination develops further as she begins to see herself as an incarnation of Durga. In her fantasy, she becomes a queen and imagines a husband who respects her as an equal companion. She says, "My husband was a loyal knight. We were perfect companions as we roamed the ravines all day, each shoulder ready for the other's load." (43) This imagined relationship is very different from the marriage Devi later experiences with Mahesh. In her fantasy, husband and wife support one another and share responsibilities equally. Her imaginary marriage therefore reflects her desire for companionship, respect, and equality.

Devi also imagines herself as a mother and protector. When her imaginary daughter is injured, she decides to fight the enemy herself: “I set out again, alone, my breasts held firmly by the old amour, now stretched tightly over my filled-out body. I met my enemy, no fat mass of lazy flesh this time, but an iron-like villain who flexed his muscle and bared his even, sharp teeth as he laughed in wild defiance” (44) This image presents Devi as a woman who refuses to remain passive. Her fantasy gives her a sense of strength and independence that she cannot easily experience in her real life. Therefore, Devi does not simply listen to her grandmother’s stories. She actively interprets and recreates them through her own imagination. The stories introduce her to different experiences of womanhood and encourage her to question established ideas about women and their roles. C. Vijayasree explains this process:

It is this physical, psychological and emotional intimacy that provides the tempo and tenor for Devi’s initiation into the world of women. Devi does not listen to her grandmother’s tales silently. She is forever eager to know the why of everything and thus displays the right mood for an initiate. She is a resisting reader whose persistent interventions into the master narrative effect re-visionist re-readings of the old texts. Devi does not merely learn the stories, but more importantly she learns that stories are meant to be revised and retold. Retelling a tale of the past, thus turns into an act of restoration-restoration of a lost tradition. (179)

Vijayasree’s observation highlights Devi’s role as an active and questioning reader. She does not accept traditional stories without thinking about them. Instead, she reinterprets them according to her own experiences. In this way, storytelling becomes a form of empowerment. Hariharan uses mythology not only to preserve cultural memory but also to question patriarchal traditions and create new possibilities for women. The stories of Pati become an important part of Devi’s emotional and psychological growth. They help her understand women’s experiences and give her an imaginative space in which she can become strong, independent, and self-aware. Thus, mythology in *The Thousand Faces of Night* becomes both a link with the past and a means of creating a new understanding of women’s identity and freedom.

Vijayasree’s observation shows that Devi is not a passive listener. She listens to her grandmother’s stories carefully and questions their meaning. She connects the old stories with her own experiences and gives them new meanings. In this way, storytelling becomes a source of

strength for Devi. Hariharan uses mythology not only to preserve traditional culture but also to question patriarchal ideas and present them from a woman's point of view. The stories of Pati help Devi understand women's lives, marriage, suffering, power, and resistance. They also give her an imaginary world where she can see herself as a strong and independent woman. Thus, the myths become an important part of Devi's emotional growth and her search for identity.

Devi's life is closely connected with the stories of Gandhari, Amba, Damayanti, and other mythical women. These stories influence the way she understands marriage and womanhood. After meeting Mahesh, Devi marries him and moves to Bangalore. She lives with her father-in-law, Baba, and the housekeeper Mayamma. At first, she tries to adjust to her new life, but she soon feels lonely and emotionally neglected. The myths in the novel show two different choices for women: accepting suffering or resisting male domination. As B. Krishnaiah explains, "These stories provide two paths to women either to obey their husbands like the former protagonists or revolt against them in the event of male domination like the latter examples." (49) Devi finds herself between these two choices. She does not want to accept suffering silently, but she is also unsure how to achieve complete freedom.

Hariharan also questions the traditional belief that a married woman's husband's house should be her permanent home. By allowing Devi to return to her mother's house, the novelist presents home as a place of emotional security rather than simply a place defined by marriage. Devi's relationship with Mahesh gradually becomes unhappy and distant. She feels isolated and begins to imagine herself as a stronger woman who can speak and act freely. For Devi, marriage becomes a symbol of sacrifice and suffering. She compares it to a knife hanging over her: "I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, the passion of sacrifice whole, all-encompassing." (54) This image shows the continuous emotional pain caused by her marriage. However, her inner self is not completely destroyed. She says, "The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for." (54) Her words show that although she tries to fulfil the duties expected of a wife, her emotional needs remain unrecognised.

Devi's education in America also does not prepare her for the realities of Indian married life. She expresses her disappointment by saying, "My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood." (54) Her education gives her knowledge, but

it does not prepare her for the traditional expectations placed on her as a wife. When she asks Mahesh why he married her, his response shows his limited understanding of love and marriage. He says, “thank god we Indians are not obsessed with love.” For Mahesh, marriage is more a social responsibility than a relationship based on emotional companionship.

Devi also tries to make friends with the wives of Mahesh’s colleagues, but she feels that she does not belong among them. Her loneliness increases because she cannot find emotional support either in her marriage or in her social surroundings. Whenever she faces difficulties in real life, she escapes into her world of dreams and imagination. This fantasy world becomes an important space where Devi can express the feelings and desires that she cannot express openly in her real life.

Hariharan presents Devi’s emotional and psychological growth through mythology, memory, fantasy, and the experiences of different women. The stories told by Pati help Devi understand marriage, suffering, tradition, and women’s lives. Mayamma’s life gives her another example of the difficulties faced by women in traditional families. Mayamma is married at a very young age to a gambler and spends her life experiencing poverty, loneliness, and suffering. For her, a successful marriage means the ability to endure pain. Hariharan writes, “Mayamma, an old family retainer, tells her that the secret of successful married life is the capacity to endure pain. Somehow Devi is not convinced. Through her perspective, we see the life of her mother Sita, the mother-in-law Parvatiamma, Mayamma, Uma and the grandmother, interwoven with several myths of Gandhari, Amba, and others.” (100)

Mayamma’s story also reveals the difficult position of women who are expected to sacrifice themselves for their families. Parvatiamma, though a religious and traditional woman, finally leaves her family in search of God. Her departure deeply affects Mayamma. Mahesh says, “She was a good woman,’ he said, as if he were writing an obituary for somebody he had not known at all. Baba, too, spoke to me of her only once” (61). When Parvatiamma leaves, she tells Mayamma, “Look after my children. My prayers will be with all of you.” She walked out of the house, a small bag hanging on her shoulder, leaving me speechless. I felt destitute, I felt my mother had died again. (63) Baba’s response also reflects the traditional belief that a woman should remain connected to her home: “She has made her choice. For a woman who leaves her home in search of a God, only death is home-coming” (64).

Devi does not accept Mayamma's idea that women must simply endure suffering. She begins to question the traditional model of womanhood represented by Mayamma and other women. Her loneliness makes her think about leaving Mahesh and creating a new life for herself. She expresses this desire clearly:

I would like to do better than sneak out, a common little adulteress. But no, that is a judgment I will leave to Amma, the soft-spoken sphinx who directs the useless lives so well. And Anna too, a ghost, pure nostalgia, must be shaken off so that I can learn to be a woman at last. I will soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas, and what if I fall with a thud, alone, the morning after? I will walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made. (95)

This quotation shows Devi's desire to create her own identity instead of simply following the roles given to women by society. Unlike the mythical women she has known since childhood, she wants to create a new model of womanhood based on her own experiences. Mayamma's suffering therefore becomes an important lesson for Devi. The novel brings together the experiences of Sita, Parvatamma, Mayamma, Uma, the grandmother, and the mythical figures of Gandhari and Amba to show different ways in which women respond to tradition and patriarchy.

Hariharan finally brings myth, memory, and personal experience together to question traditional ideas about women. The stories of the grandmother are reinterpreted through Devi's experiences, while Mayamma's memories give a voice to the suffering of an ordinary woman. Through these different female experiences, Hariharan suggests that women do not have to accept the roles imposed upon them. They can question tradition, resist suffering, and create their own identities.

Both Devi and Mayamma experience boredom and restriction in the marital household. Devi is physically confined within the house and gradually begins to feel as though she is living in a prison. Her situation can be compared to that of a caged bird. However, Devi is not simply a person who can be physically controlled. Her imagination remains free. Although Mahesh attempts to control her physical surroundings, he cannot completely control her thoughts and desires. Her fantasy world provides an escape from her restricted domestic life. Through imagination, she can become the powerful woman she wishes to be. As Devi continues to face difficulties in marriage, Mahesh becomes concerned about her fertility. He takes her to a

gynaecologist. After the medical examination, the doctor discusses her sexual life and suggests adoption as another possibility. The doctor's suggestion also reflects the lack of emotional communication between Devi and Mahesh.

Devi is unable to control her feelings of loneliness, alienation, and frustration. Her emotional pain gradually becomes visible. Mayamma, who has herself experienced years of suffering, attempts to advise Devi according to the values she has inherited. She encourages Devi to endure her difficulties just as she herself has endured suffering in the past. The contrast between Devi and Mayamma becomes very clear at this point. Mayamma believes that suffering is a necessary part of marriage, whereas Devi begins to question this belief. She does not want to spend her entire life accepting pain as her destiny. Silence becomes Devi's constant companion in her marital home. She feels emotionally separated from Mahesh and from the people around her. This silence is interrupted by the music of Gopal, a neighbour and Hindustani classical singer.

Gopal's music provides Devi with an emotional connection that she does not find in her marriage. His attention and affectionate words attract her. For Devi, Gopal initially appears to offer an escape from her loneliness. She begins to look beyond the boundaries of her marital home and becomes emotionally involved with him. Her relationship with Gopal eventually leads to her leaving Mahesh. However, Gopal does not provide the lasting solution she expects. Her escape from one relationship does not immediately give her the identity and happiness she is searching for. Devi gradually understands that freedom cannot be achieved simply by moving from one man to another.

The relationship with Gopal therefore becomes another stage in Devi's journey. It forces her to examine her own desires and decisions. She eventually realises that she must discover herself rather than depend on another person to define her life. Devi finally leaves Gopal and returns to her mother, Sita. Her return is significant because it brings her back to the place from which her journey began. The mother's home is no longer simply a temporary space that she must leave after marriage. It becomes a place where Devi can pause, reflect, and reconsider her identity. At the end of her journey, Devi finds comfort in her mother's music. Sita's veena becomes a symbol of emotional connection and understanding. The music does not demand anything from Devi. It simply exists as a quiet presence that she can experience inwardly.

Devi's return to her mother therefore has a deeper meaning. She is not returning as the same young woman who once left home to enter marriage. She returns with greater awareness of herself, her desires, and her limitations. Her journey through marriage, loneliness, fantasy, and relationships has helped her understand that self-realisation must come from within. Unlike the imaginary victories of her fantasy world, Devi's final achievement is an internal one. She does not defeat an external enemy like the warrior women of her grandmother's stories. Instead, she confronts her own fears, disappointments, and confusion. Her real victory lies in gaining the courage to make her own choices. Thus, *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents Devi's journey as a movement from dependence to self-awareness. Through flashbacks, myths, memories, fantasy, and everyday experiences, Hariharan reveals the emotional struggles of a woman living within a patriarchal social structure. Devi's return to Sita does not represent failure. Rather, it marks the beginning of a new stage in which she starts to understand herself and seek an identity beyond the roles imposed upon her by marriage and society.

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