



## FEMINISTIC SENSIBILITY IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S NOVEL: *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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### Abstract

Githa Hariharan, a well-known Indian woman author, has tried to focus on the deeply entrenched biases of Indian society against the feminine gender. The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) deals with the issues of feminism as well as the issues of gender and identity also. In it, she tries to explore mainly the lives of the typescript namely, Devi, Sita and Mayamma who survives in male subjugated society. Woman faces the entire problem in her life and even survives with her inner strength. Through the study of women characters, Githa provides us with a peek into the Indian institution and culture and the situation of women in the Indian society. Here in this paper, I wish to throw light towards Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, which is not exactly considered a feministic work of art, however, aptly depicts the sensibilities of a woman. She wove together the lives of three women belonging to three generations in Madras in the South of India. The paper depicts how the women are torn between tradition and modernity while trying to shape their lives in their own ways; in so doing, they recall and, in a way, reinterpret the great myths recorded in Sanskrit: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to show changes in the relationship between the sexes. She has produced an interesting array of female protagonist who suffers within the framework of marriage and shows that how marriages, which are supposed to be the most beautiful chapter of a woman's life, end up being the most difficult one.

**Keywords:** Feminism, subjugation, Feminine, Self-Effacement, Gender Biased, intolerance, Patriarchal.

### Introduction

The feminist movement "includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex." to so says David Boucher in the 'Introduction' to his book *The Feminist Challenge*. The feminist consciousness is a

consciousness of victimization by the dominating males of the society which leads to women's subordinate status and their consequent oppression. In the mid-1800s the term 'Feminism' was used to refer to 'the qualities of females' and it was not until after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term 'feministe', was used regularly in

English for a brief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Although the term 'Feminism' in English is rooted in the mobilization for woman suffrage in Europe and the US during the late 19th and early 20th century; of course, efforts to obtain justice for women did not begin or end with this period of activism.

### ***The Thousands Faces of Night***

Githa Hariharan, mainly interested in the portrayal of women characters, explores in her first award winning novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* the marriages, old traditional values, story and myth, passion and loneliness in the life of Indian women. Marriage becomes an instrument of female exploitation and sub negation leading to trivialities lack of communication, loneliness, hollowness and incapacity.

Semione de Beavouir writes, "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates women"

Structurally, the novel is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the protagonist and her inner conflict of becoming a 'good girl' (as her mother wants following the norms of a traditional society) or a 'bad girl' (shedding the traditional norms and leading her life on her own terms). It introduces Devi (the protagonist), trying to shed her traditional Indian self (trying to be a 'bad girl'), in a North-American university campus and her life in India after coming back to India (the overpowering of the 'good girl' who accepts its cultural heritage). Devi belongs to a traditional Hindu Brahmin family that believes that marriage is the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Devi exhibits enough control compromising with her individuality agreeing for an arranged marriage. The narrative also takes us to, Devi's childhood, Devi's grandmother's house where the seeds of such a conflict were sown. It was here that Devi learns the rules of being a good girl. She does not pursue a career after her graduation from USA. In US, she is with Dan but Dan's culture was totally different from Devi's and she felt like a stranger, different and unfit for Dan. She hears her 'culture calling'. The 'good girl' in Devi wins. She leaves her past life in U.S and comes back to India to

marry. Devi is tamed by 'memories' of all the stories told by Grandma. A victim of her own imagination of herself as a 'Devi', she is trapped easily into a traditional marriage forgetting her past.

The second part explores Devi's life after an arranged marriage. Mahesh, Devi's husband takes her for granted. Devi is unable to adjust in the new atmosphere. She is unhappy, dissatisfied and lonely. Devi says, 'This then is marriage, the end of ends; two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood. Lonely Devi feels protected in presence of her father –in –law, who again nurtures the 'good girl syndrome' in her and through this books of philosophy shows her the path of becoming a virtuous wife. After he leaves for US, Devi observes and listens to the stories of Mayamma-the housekeeper. She also observes and feels frustrated with the repression of women surrounding her. The 'bad girl' in her starts overpowering.

The third part of the novel explores the other women characters of the narrative like Sita (her mother, who leaves her musical career to become an ideal daughter-in –law), Mayamma (her housemaid, who is unable to bear children and suffers cruelty and even after bearing a male child suffers exploitation until her son dies), and Gauri (her maid-servant who collects money for her marriage and then falls in love with her brother-in-law). Devi explores the myths and questions their relevance. She explores her own self. Her decision of not having children, by not trying continuously and 'hysterically' to conceive, symbolizes her search for self. Inspired by her mother-in –law who left her husband's house to lead a religious life, she also leaves her husband's house with Gopal. However, soon enough, she begins to see her role (search for identity) in Gopal's life and finds it a little more than an object. Towards the end of the narrative, Devi realizes that all this while she was trying to be a 'good' girl and was trying to please society. Devi plays a role of the 'other' in

lives of three different men. She is frustrated in these roles that she was playing. She realizes that she, like all other women around her, has spent her life in becoming the 'virtuous women' or playing the role of the 'good girl' or 'ideal woman' who never existed or who has grown obsolete with the passage of time. She realizes that she will not be able to do justice with herself if she continues to behave like a 'good girl' from the mythologies. She rebels. She decides that she will not fight with her own self anymore and would resolve the conflict in her. She decides to satisfy nobody but herself and then onwards does not have any qualms in quashing all myths and becoming a 'bad girl'. And finally comes back to her mother to re-define her individuality.

### Conclusion

Githa Hariharan ends her novel with Devi's final decision that no longer on the run and she moves out from Gopal and she returned back to her mother to start a fresh life. When she entered the garden of her mother's home she was invited by the note of Veena played by her mother. It provides the favorable climate for the process of renewal. Githa Hariharan clearly pictures the boredom and loneliness experienced by married woman when she feels ignored and unwanted. Githa Hariharan is engaged in different degrees with social reforms, what makes her writer-activists, as she is sensitive to gender and caste experiences. Hariharan's protagonist Devi rejects the tradition and opted for the positive aspects of modernity. She breaks the tradition and enters the world in which she believes. Githa Hariharan considered her art of writing 'a mission' and has not handled any trivial theme in her novel for novel's sake. She has documented almost all the sufferings of women and analyzed the real problems of Indian women in different angles.

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