



## Breaking the silence: Women's struggles for freedom in the thousand faces of night

S Soundarajan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. D Prasad<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar Department of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Kumbakonam, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English, Government Arts College, (Autonomous) Kumbakonam, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) explores the struggles of Indian women against patriarchal expectations, personal desires, and societal constraints. The novel portrays the suffering and resistance of Devi, her mother Sita, and the maid Mayamma. Devi, after returning from the United States, finds herself confined within an arranged marriage. Her search for freedom leads her to challenge societal norms, yet each act of defiance brings new limitations. Sita personifies the quiet sacrifices of a traditional wife, while Mayamma endures brutal oppression at the lowest rungs of the social order. Hariharan fusions myth and reality and reinterprets the stories of Gandhari and Damayanti to show how myths enforce female subjugation. The novel presents marriage as a form of confinement, where women's worth is tied to their ability to serve and reproduce. Devi's journey from compliance to rebellion reflects the struggle of women attempting to reclaim their voices. This paper examines patriarchal oppression, the role of mythology, and the search for identity in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. It shows how Hariharan challenges rigid gender roles and presents different forms of resistance.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, women's identity, myth and reality, marriage and confinement, tradition vs. modernity, female resistance.

### Introduction

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) is a profound examination of women's struggles for freedom in a deeply patriarchal society. The novel, which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993, presents the silent suffering and quiet resistance of women across generations. Hariharan examines how tradition shapes female identity and limits their choices through the lives of Devi, her mother Sita, and the maid Mayamma. Each of these women faces different forms of confinement – whether through marriage, social expectations, or the burdens of domestic duty.

The novel begins with Devi's return to India after studying in the United States. She hopes to carve out her own path but is quickly drawn into the expectations of marriage. Her mother, Sita, arranges a match for her and sees it as the key to stability and respectability. However, Devi soon realizes that marriage offers little beyond loneliness and restriction. Her struggle to break free reflects the larger tension between tradition and modernity. Hariharan also explores the role of mythology in reinforcing female subjugation. Devi's grandmother narrates stories of Gandhari and Damayanti and portrays them as models of devotion and sacrifice. As Devi matures, she questions these myths and sees them as instruments of control rather than sources of empowerment. The novel challenges these narratives and provides alternative interpretations that emphasize women's resistance rather than submission. This paper examines how *The Thousand Faces of Night* portrays the intersection of silence and resistance in women's lives. It analyses the ways in which Hariharan critiques patriarchal oppression, reimagines traditional myths, and explores the ongoing struggle for female autonomy.

### Women's Struggles and Identity Crisis

*The Thousand Faces of Night* portrays women as individuals trapped in a patriarchal system. The novel explores their struggles to establish identity, navigate marriage, and seek personal fulfilment. Devi, Sita, and Mayamma represent different generations, yet their experiences reveal similar patterns of oppression. Devi returns to India after completing her education in the United States. She has experienced independence abroad, yet at home, she faces restrictions. Her mother, Sita, insists on finding a husband for her and sees marriage as the natural next step. Devi initially agrees and accepts Mahesh's proposal but soon realizes the limits of her new life. She feels isolated, as her husband is often away on business trips. Mayamma handles the household work, so Devi has nothing meaningful to do. Her frustration deepens when Mahesh dismisses her desire to work. When she expresses her wish for a job, he responds coldly: "What can you do?" Mahesh asked, like a ruthless interviewer stripping away the inessential. When he says the words, they become true. What could I do?" (64-65). This moment highlights how Devi is denied agency. She is expected to be content as a housewife, yet she finds herself disconnected from the life she had imagined. Mahesh believes financial security is enough and ignores Devi's intellectual and emotional needs. His attitude reflects the patriarchal mindset that defines a woman's role by her domestic duties rather than her aspirations.

Sita, Devi's mother, represents an older generation of women who internalized patriarchal expectations. As a young bride, she was passionate about music and played the veena beautifully. However, after being reprimanded for neglecting household duties, she made a silent yet powerful choice. She destroyed the strings of her veena and never played again. Her grandmother narrates this event by

recalling Sita's quiet submission: "She reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They came apart with a discordant twang of protest" (30). Sita's act symbolizes the suppression of women's personal desires. She chooses to fulfil her role as a wife and daughter-in-law and sacrifices her love for music. The episode demonstrates how women are conditioned to prioritize family over self-expression.

Mayamma's story offers a more extreme example of female suffering. She was married off as a child and endured years of cruelty from her mother-in-law. When she failed to conceive, she faced relentless abuse. Her mother-in-law forced her to perform rituals, starve herself, and endure physical pain in the hope of bearing a son. Recalling one such moment, Mayamma says: "She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my bareness. I burned, my thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails." (113). Mayamma's suffering illustrates the brutal reality of women in rigidly patriarchal households. She is denied autonomy, treated as a vessel for childbirth, and subjected to endless cruelty. Her story reveals the dehumanization women face when their worth is tied to their reproductive abilities.

Through Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Hariharan highlights the different ways women navigate oppression. Devi resists, but struggles to break free. Sita conforms, yet her silent rebellion remains significant. Mayamma endures but finds solace in small acts of survival. The novel presents their struggles as part of a larger battle for female identity, questioning whether true liberation is ever fully possible.

### Myth and Reality: The Role of Storytelling

Hariharan blends myth and reality in the novel to expose the oppressive roles assigned to women. Traditional myths, often used to reinforce patriarchal ideals, are reinterpreted in ways that challenge their original meanings. Devi's grandmother plays a crucial role in shaping her understanding of womanhood through these stories. However, as Devi matures, she sees them differently and realizes that they justify female suffering rather than inspire empowerment.

One of the key myths retold in the novel is the story of Gandhari from the *Mahabharata*. In traditional narratives, Gandhari is portrayed as the ideal wife who voluntarily blindfolds herself after learning that her husband, Dhritarashtra, is blind. Her act is seen as a symbol of devotion and sacrifice. However, Devi's grandmother presents a different version. She describes Gandhari's reaction when she first sees her husband: "In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing. But she tore off a piece of a thick red skirt and tied it tightly over her own eyes. She groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury" (28-29). This version portrays Gandhari's blindness as an act of silent rebellion rather than devotion. She is not a submissive wife but a woman reacting to betrayal and disappointment. By presenting Gandhari in this light, Hariharan suggests that many so-called 'ideal' women in mythology were, in reality, forced into their sacrifices.

Another important myth in the novel is that of Damayanti. In the *Mahabharata*, she is celebrated as a devoted wife who chooses Nala over all other suitors at her Swayamvara. The original story portrays her as a woman driven by pure love and unwavering loyalty. However, the grandmother's

version reveals a more strategic and calculated side to Damayanti: "Not a sound was heard in the hall as the kings held their breath and Damayanti walked slowly, surely, towards the row of enthroned bridegrooms-to-be... Her heart, loyal, steadfast, never wavered from the path leading to Nala." When Devi questions why Damayanti pretended to consider other suitors, the grandmother replies: "Because a woman gets her heart's desire by great cunning" (19-20). This retelling challenges the idealized view of women's loyalty and shows that survival often depends on strategy and manipulation. Through such revisions of myth, the novel exposes the unrealistic expectations placed on women and reclaims these stories as narratives of resistance.

Devi later realizes that these myths have been used to shape her perception of what it means to be a woman. She remembers admiring these heroines as a child and seeing their sacrifices as noble. However, as she faces the realities of marriage and societal expectations, she sees the contradictions in these stories. She reflects: "I must have, as I grew older, begun to see the fine cracks in the bridge my grandmother built between the stories I loved, and the less self-contained, more sordid stories I saw unfolding around me" (30-31). This realization marks a turning point in Devi's journey. She begins to question whether the sacrifices of women in myths are truly acts of devotion or simply forced compromises. Her growing awareness reflects a larger feminist critique of traditional narratives that glorify female suffering. By juxtaposing myth with reality, Hariharan exposes the gaps between idealized womanhood and lived experience. The novel suggests that myths, rather than serving as guides for women, often function as tools of control. However, through reinterpretation, these same myths can be reclaimed as symbols of defiance.

### Marriage as Confinement

Hariharan presents marriage in the novel as a restrictive institution that limits women's choices and forces them into predefined roles. The novel illustrates how marriage, instead of offering companionship and support, often becomes a space of loneliness, duty, and submission. Devi, Sita, and Mayamma each experience marriage as confinement and face emotional and physical burdens imposed on women.

Devi's experience with marriage begins with uncertainty. After rejecting the possibility of marrying her American friend, Dan, she returns to India, where her mother arranges a match for her. Despite her reservations, she agrees to marry Mahesh. However, she soon realizes that her role as a wife is passive and limiting. Mahesh is mostly absent, absorbed in his work and social life, leaving Devi alone. She has no meaningful responsibilities, as Mayamma handles the household tasks. She quickly begins to feel isolated and unfulfilled. When Devi expresses a desire to work, Mahesh dismisses her. He believes that financial stability is enough and that Devi should focus on her home. He tells her: "You need at least one more degree for that. And what will you do when the baby comes?" (64-65). His response reveals the expectation that a woman's purpose is to bear children rather than pursue personal ambitions. Devi's frustration grows as she realizes that she has no control over her own life.

Mahesh's solution to Devi's boredom is motherhood. He believes that having a child will give her a purpose and prevent her from questioning her role. This reflects the patriarchal idea that a woman's primary duty is

reproduction. Devi resists this expectation, but Mahesh remains indifferent to her emotional needs. When she hesitates to conceive, he responds coldly, further alienating her.

Sita, Devi's mother, represents an earlier generation of women who fully embraced the sacrifices required of marriage. As a young bride, she loved playing the veena. But, after being scolded for neglecting household duties, she abandoned her passion. She devoted herself entirely to her family and accepted her role without question. Her silent submission is evident when she destroys the strings of her veena:

... "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?"

Sita hung her head over the veena for a minute that seemed to stretch for ages, enveloping us in an unbearable silence. There she reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They came apart with a discordant twang of protest. She ... said in a clear, stinging whisper, "yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in law." (30)"

This act symbolizes the destruction of her individuality. Unlike Devi, she does not resist her confinement but instead internalizes it. She becomes the 'ideal' wife and mother and makes sure her daughter follows the same path.

Mayamma's marriage is even more tragic. She was married off as a child and faced relentless abuse. When she failed to conceive, her mother-in-law forced her into extreme fertility rituals. She suffered physical violence and humiliation. Her experience shows how marriage often reduces women to childbearing. Reflecting on her suffering, she recalls: "Cut the right one open, here, take this blade. Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam" (113). This horrifying moment reveals the extent to which patriarchal beliefs dehumanize women. Mayamma's worth was determined solely by her ability to produce a son. Her pain and suffering were dismissed as unimportant compared to the continuation of the family line. Hariharan contrasts these three women's experiences to show how marriage functions as a system of control. Sita accepts it, Devi initially submits but later rebels, and Mayamma endures it with quiet resilience. Through their stories, the novel critiques the idea that marriage is the ultimate goal for women. Instead, it exposes the loneliness, subjugation, and loss of identity that often accompany it.

### Character Analysis

Hariharan presents *The Thousand Faces of Night* through the perspectives of its female characters, each representing different aspects of womanhood in a patriarchal society. Devi, Sita, Mayamma, and Parvatamma navigate oppression in different ways, highlighting the varied responses to societal constraints.

#### Devi: The Search for Self

Devi is the novel's protagonist, and her journey is one of self-discovery and resistance. After her education in the United States, she returns to India with the hope of shaping her own future. However, she is quickly drawn into the expectations of marriage. She initially conforms, agreeing to marry Mahesh despite her doubts. However, after experiencing isolation and emotional neglect, she begins to question the institution of marriage. Her growing dissatisfaction is evident in her conversations with Mahesh.

When she expresses her frustration with her lack of purpose, Mahesh dismisses her concerns:

"Why did you marry me?" I asked.

"Whatever people get married for," Mahesh said. He peered into the mirror and readjusted the knot of his tie. "Thank God we Indians are not obsessed with love" (54-55).

This response reflects the pragmatic, almost indifferent attitude Mahesh has toward marriage. He sees it as a duty, while Devi longs for companionship and emotional fulfillment. Her rebellion takes shape when she becomes involved with Gopal, a musician. She sees him as an escape from her restrictive life, but their relationship soon mirrors the same patterns of control and neglect. Gopal is passionate about his music but indifferent to Devi's needs. She realizes that he, like Mahesh, prioritizes his own ambitions over her emotional well-being. As she reflects on her situation, she experiences a moment of painful clarity: "She felt like an ignorant child imprisoned in a woman's body, displaying like a badge, her rebellious, independent spirit" (128). This realization marks the end of her search for validation through men. She decides to leave Gopal and realizes that true freedom cannot come from another person. In the end, she returns to her mother, seeking a new beginning.

#### Sita: The Silent Sacrificer

Sita represents the traditional Indian woman who suppresses her personal desires to fulfil her domestic duties. Her sacrifice is most evident in the moment she abandons her veena, a symbol of her passion. After being scolded for neglecting household chores, she destroys the strings of her instrument: "Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in-law" (30).

These words reflect her complete submission to her role. She never openly resists patriarchy but instead ensures that her daughter follows the same path. She arranges Devi's marriage and sees it as the best choice for her. However, despite her compliance, Sita is not entirely passive. She sends Devi to study in the United States, an act that suggests she still hopes for a better future for her daughter. Her reaction to Devi's decision to leave Mahesh reveals her deep frustration. When she receives Mahesh's letter about Devi's disappearance, she is furious: "So this was what she reaped after years of sacrifice, years of iron-like self-control" (108). Sita's anger stems from the realization that her sacrifices have been meaningless. Despite following all the rules, she is left with uncertainty and disappointment.

#### Mayamma: The Suffering Survivor

Mayamma's life is defined by pain and endurance. Married as a child, she faces abuse from both her husband and mother-in-law. When she fails to conceive, her mother-in-law imposes extreme punishments and forces her into religious rituals and physical suffering. She recalls: "You have been admiring your fine new sari, have you? ... She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly-ground spices into my bareness" (113). This moment captures the cruelty of a system that treats women as nothing more than child-bearers. Mayamma eventually escapes her past by finding shelter in Mahesh's house. However, survival does not give her empowerment. She stays a silent observer and gives Devi occasional comfort but never questions the status quo.

### Parvatiamma: The Woman Who Walks Away

Parvatiamma, Mahesh's mother, serves as a contrast to the other women in the novel. While Devi struggles with whether to leave, and Sita endures her fate, Parvatiamma takes direct action. She leaves her home without a word and abandons her family. This quiet act is revolutionary. Unlike Devi, who leaves and returns, Parvatiamma never looks back. Baba, her husband, never fully understands why she left. He remains puzzled, saying: "The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses" (71). His statement reflects his belief that a wife should remain devoted to household duties, never considering her own desires. Parvatiamma's departure is a rejection of this role.

### Conclusion

*The Thousand Faces of Night* critiques patriarchy and explores how women struggle against deep-rooted social expectations. Some accept their fate, others endure in silence, while a few attempt to reclaim their agency. However, true freedom remains elusive, as every act of resistance brings consequences. Devi's journey reflects the challenge of self-liberation. She first conforms to marriage, then leaves in search of love, only to find that both Mahesh and Gopal share the same patriarchal mindset. Her return to her mother suggests that rejecting societal norms does not guarantee true independence. Sita represents quiet suffering, while Mayamma's life exposes the brutal realities faced by lower-class women. Parvatiamma, the only one to leave without hesitation, offers a rare example of open resistance. Hariharan's reworking of myth strengthens feminist message of the novel. By challenging the glorified sacrifices of Gandhari and Damayanti, she questions the belief that a woman's virtue lies in suffering. Gita Hariharan asks whether women can ever fully escape the roles imposed upon them. Thus, the novel presents womanhood as a continuous struggle between tradition and selfhood, where silence is not absolute, and small acts of defiance emerge. However, true liberation remains an ongoing battle.

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