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Fluid Selves and Gendered Constraints: The Multiplicity of Identity in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Sandeep Kumar
(Research Scholar)
PG Department of English & Research Centre
Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Abstract

In a society in which ancestral traditions frequently define limitations of women, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* is a quiet but profound meditation on identity, resistance, and regeneration. Identity in Hariharan's universe is never just one account, but rather an amalgam of echoes, myths transmitted, silences inherited, and freedoms half-claimed. The story portrays the interrelated experiences of three generations of women as they achieve the delicate balance between submission and self-discovery. The hidden power of tradition determines their existence, yet inside those inherited boundaries, there is a continuous agitation and a yearning to redefine what it is to be a woman in a world that expects obedience. Hariharan's elegant blending of myth and modernism transforms commonplace occurrences into reflections on belonging, alienation, and the bravery to recover selfhood. This study discusses how the protagonists confront social, cultural, and emotional constraints in pursuit of a fragile feeling of autonomy, making self-fluidity both a tactic and a struggle. The story's fluctuating voices and symbolic patterns reflect the brittleness of identity itself, where disintegration is not just a loss but also an essential step on the path to self-awareness. This research interprets Hariharan's work as a comprehensive investigation of feminine consciousness inside the social fabric of patriarchal India by following these processes between silence and articulation, tradition and revolution. In the end, it suggests the diversity of identities in Hariharan's novel that represents the never-ending dialogue between creativity and limitation, where the act of being remains to be the most persistent kind of resistance.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, Identity, Patriarchal, Selfhood, Empowerment, Resistance

Githa Hariharan, born in 1954 in Coimbatore, India, is an esteemed Indian writer and editor whose works have made significant contributions to contemporary Indian literature. Raised in a Tamil Brahmin home, Hariharan's upbringing in Bombay and Manila provided her with a diverse cultural background, which has deeply influenced her writing. Her debut novel, "The Thousand Faces of Night," published in 1992, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first novel and established her as a strong voice in Indian Literature. This novel, like much of her work, explores the complex intersections of gender, tradition, and modernity in Indian society. Hariharan's narratives often delve into the lives of women, examining the constraints imposed on them by societal norms and the ways in which they navigate their identities in the face of such challenges. Her writing is marked by a keen sensitivity to the nuances of human relationships and the socio-political forces that shape individual destinies.

Hariharan's literary oeuvre extends beyond her debut novel, encompassing short stories, essays, and other novels that continue to explore themes of social justice, identity, and resistance. Her work is characterized by a deep engagement with the cultural and historical contexts of India, as well as a commitment to giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced. As an editor, Hariharan has also played a crucial role in shaping contemporary Indian literature, curating works that reflect the rich diversity of the Indian experience. Based in New Delhi, she remains an influential figure in the literary world, not only for her own writing but also for her contributions to the broader literary community. Through her work, Hariharan challenges readers to reconsider conventional narratives and to engage with the complexities of identity, power, and resistance in a rapidly changing world.

Throughout her career, which spanned from 1992 to 2009, she made significant contributions to literature with five notable novels.With '*The Thousand Faces of Night'*, her debut novel, she was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1992. Four other novels came after this one: '*Fugitive Histories*' (2009), '*When Dreams Travel*' (1999), 'In Times of Siege' (2004), and '*The Ghost of Vasu Master*' (1994). In addition to these novels, she also penned several short stories, with collections including '*The Art of Dying* '(1993) and '*The Winning Team'* (2004).

Hariharan's debut novel, '*The Thousand Faces of Night'*, was published in 1992 and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. The lives of three ladies who lived in Madras, South India, in separate generations are deftly woven together in this book.Through the characters of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Hariharan delves into their battles for survival, independence, and identity within a patriarchal society. The narrative vividly portrays their efforts to balance societal expectations with their own desires for self-fulfillment. By highlighting the conflict between personal aspirations and societal norms, the novel underscores the enduring struggle for selfhood in a male-dominated world. "No question, however fine and niggling, took my grandmother by surprise. She twisted it, turned it inside out, and cooked up her own homemade yard sticks for life." (Hariharan20).

Present-day Indian women's writing frequently addresses the contentious issue of women's identity. The roles and behaviors that define women's identities are frequently determined by a variety of philosophies, deeds, and cultural conventions. Religion and society aim to impose a fixed identity upon women, attempting to govern not only their lives but also their bodies. Identity is defined as "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others" in the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Third Edition. This definition proposes that, regardless of gender, an individual's identity should include all of their special traits, skills, and abilities. However, this ideal is rarely realized for women, who are frequently defined by external forces rather than being allowed the autonomy to define themselves.

Identity and belonging are essential components of human existence, deeply connected to our understanding of self and our relationships with others. These themes have been a constant focus in literature throughout history, as they reflect the universal human quest to define oneself in relation to the surrounding world. Identity in literature represents the multifaceted development of an individual's sense of self, encompassing personal experiences, cultural background, societal roles, and internal self-perception. It involves the exploration of one's values, beliefs, desires, and the formation of a distinct identity within the broader societal framework. Belonging, by contrast, addresses the innate human desire for acceptance, connection, and a sense of community. It is about finding a place where one feels included,

where shared experiences affirm one's identity, and where a sense of security and acceptance is established. In this framework, Sydney Shoemaker, a philosopher at Cornell University, concurs with Lejeune's characterization of personality or identity as being both unique and consistent. He states that:

> "The crucial epistemological fact is that persons have, in memory, an access to their own past histories that is unlike the access they have to the histories of other things (including other persons); when one remembers doing or experiencing something, one normally has no need to employ any criterion of identity in order to know that the subject of the remembered action or experience is (i.e., is identical with) oneself." (Shoemaker 574)

The literary themes of identification and belonging are of great significance because they capture the intricacies of the human condition and serve as a window into the complex and varied aspects of both individual and societal existence. By delving into the depths of human awareness, writers can depict the internal and external conflicts that result from the search for connection and self-identity. With the help of literature, readers can develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding by learning about a variety of viewpoints, cultures, and experiences.

Identity has long posed a challenge for sociolinguistic theory, though the nature of this challenge has evolved over time. Initially viewed as a problem in itself, the focus has shifted to understanding the specific nature of the issues surrounding identity. As Saadawi observes, "Identity is a discourse, and it is essential to know who is using it, who decides, who labels me, what all this interest in 'cultural identity' means, where does it lead [...] I have tried to tell you about my identity [...] But we are so engrossed in defining our identities when they are changing all the time" (Hariharan 118-126).

Heinz Lichtenstein asserts that identity is a fundamental human need, emphasizing that "loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity" (Lichtenstein 78). Building on this concept, Woodward notes that "identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources— from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender [...It] gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us

and the society in which we live [...] Often [it] is most clearly defined by differences, i.e., by what it is not" (Woodward 1-2).

Foucault makes the case that the construction of selfhood and sexual identity are closely related in The History of Sexuality, Volume I. Since sexuality is now viewed as fundamental to one's identity in modern society, knowing one's sexual truth is similar to knowing one's own truth. As a result, selfhood and identity are closely related.

This book examines the nuanced relationship between identification and selfhood, concentrating on Simone de Beauvoir's bisexuality and sense of self. Through a variety of depictions in newspapers, scholarly circles, and biographies, de Beauvoir's identity is presented as her own and her obligation. Even though de Beauvoir is shown in a variety of ways in these domains, bisexuality is consistently portrayed as having emerged in an unfinished or underdeveloped form in these various contexts. This implies that the discursive potential of bisexuality is limited or obscured by the same techniques and practices that mold de Beauvoir's identity.

As Devi gets ready to depart America, the novel opens. Devi returns to India after declining her American friend Dan's marriage proposal, only to find herself sucked back into the customs of her traditional family. Devi's mother, Sita, discreetly arranges for Devi to marry Mahesh, a manager at a global corporation. Devi discovers, nevertheless, that the life she has entered is not what she had anticipated following the wedding. Mahesh, a pragmatic man lacking emotional depth, sees marriage as a mere obligation, expressing gratitude that "Indians are not obsessed with love" (Hariharan 55).

Devi learns to live with the limitations that society and her family have set on her as she makes her way through her new existence. Her mother's carefully planned arranged marriage starts to feel like a betrayal, and the traditional family life she is forced into feels more like a cage than a haven. Devi's path is marked by internal strife as she tries to balance the strict requirements of her ethnic identity with her aspirations for emotional fulfillment and independence.

Through interacting with people that struggle with issues of identity and belonging, readers are encouraged to consider their own sense of self and relationships with others, which promotes reflection and personal development. Additionally, because literature provides a forum for a variety of narratives and voices, it possesses the rare capacity to confront and criticize cultural conventions and prejudices. It has the power to illuminate the lived realities of underprivileged groups, illuminating the complexities of their identities and the challenges they face in their quest for acceptance.

The book explores in great detail the conflicting themes of duty vs desire, tradition versus modernity, and the nuanced roles that women play in Indian society. Devi's narrative offers a moving examination of the costs and compromises that frequently come with the pursuit of identity and a sense of belonging, especially for women who are torn between two different worlds. Devi starts to doubt not just the life she has chosen but also the larger social institutions that have influenced it as she struggles with the emotional barrenness of her marriage to Mahesh. Her experience is a mirror of the more general difficulties encountered by many women who are caught between their own desires and the expectations of society.

Hariharan effectively illustrates women's quest for self-liberation through her narrative strategy of embedding texts within texts and interweaving the *Mahabharata* and folk tales with the experiences of real women. These compelling stories provide profound insights into the female psyche, focusing on the central theme that "a woman meets her fate alone" (Hariharan 28).

The use of mythology in *The Thousand Faces of Night* serves as a powerful tool to explore the theme of multiplicity of identity. Hariharan interlaces Devi’s story with tales of mythical women from Indian epics and folklore, such as Amba, Draupadi, and Gandhari, who, like the novel’s characters, struggle with the roles assigned to them by society. These mythological references not only enrich the narrative but also draw parallels between the mythical and the contemporary, suggesting that the struggles of identity are both timeless and universal.

The novel deftly captures the complexity of identity via the lives of its female protagonists, who represent the multitude of aspects of womanhood in a patriarchal culture. The novel's characters all exhibit various reactions to the demands of conventional roles and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. The protagonist, Devi, is torn between the modern, Western ideas she has been exposed to and her traditional upbringing. After studying in the US, she returned to India, where she struggled to balance her newfound freedom with the expectations of her family and society at home. This was the beginning of her internal turmoil. Devi is divided between three identities: the obedient daughter, the devoted wife, and the independent woman who longs for more. This conflict is representative of the larger issue of identity plurality. Her experience is representative of the difficulties encountered by many women who have to reconcile the sometimes incompatible demands of tradition and modernity, as well as societal obligation and personal desire.

Devi's mother Sita is an additional aspect of this diversity. In contrast to Devi, Sita has sacrificed her personal aspirations in order to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and mother. But her tale is not one of straightforward compliance; underlying her outward conformity is a nuanced identity defined by unspoken opposition and unmet desires. Sita's unwavering devotion to tradition might be interpreted as a kind of autonomy within the constraints of her restricted choices, as well as a coping technique. She represents the ideal of the selfless mother on the one hand, but she also carries a deep sense of loss and unfulfilled potential on the other. This makes her identity complex.

Symbolizing the continuing heritage of these various identities throughout generations, the grandmother connects the past and present with her tales of mythological heroines. Through these characters, Hariharan shows how identity is a mosaic of experiences, roles, and narratives that women must continually negotiate and renegotiate throughout their lifetimes rather than a single, set thing. According to the novel, women's empowerment and self-realization in a complex, dynamic world depend on their ability to recognize and embrace this variety.

Since women are frequently seen as the custodians of culture and identity markers, the issue of identity is vital to them. Because birth, life, and the actuality of the two sexes are three unavoidable truths that all cultures must face, the difficulties and tensions that underlie the

definitions of self, gender, and collectivity are globally significant. As such, the notion of gender is fundamental to all societies and their sense of shared identity. Gender norms are therefore essential to all civilizations and their sense of collective identity, according to Shaheed (Shaheed 8). Alternatively, as articulated by others, patriarchal systems facilitate the production and replication of labor and life.

As Medhavi and Sahay has pointed out, “The evolution of feminism from the second to the fourth wave highlights the fluidity of feminist theory” (187), so, the social roles and relationships that are assigned to men and women, including ideas of femininity and masculinity, are collectively referred to as "gender." Gender is concerned with social constructions and inequality, as opposed to "sex," which only relates to the biological distinctions between males and females. It discusses the wider differences between genders and is not just restricted to conversations about women or females. Understanding and resolving the systematic disadvantages that women and girls experience in a variety of contexts—social, political, economic, legal, educational, and physical—are the core goals of gender studies. As a result, gender-focused analysis and actions frequently seek to rectify these disparities, with a focus on enhancing the status of women.

The objective of attaining equal rights for women in all realms of life—political, social, economic, cultural, and personal—unites a variety of movements and beliefs that collectively constitute feminism. Advocating for women's equality and rights in a variety of contexts—including voting, holding public office, employment, equitable pay, owning property, education, signing contracts, marital equality, and maternity leave—is not the same as being anti-men. In addition to advocating for physical autonomy, feminists have worked to shield women and girls from domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and rape. In both home and professional contexts, women should be able to exhibit and maintain their equality by their decisions and behaviors, according to the feminist viewpoint.

Hariharan uses the characters of Baba, Devi's grandmother, and Sita's father-in-law to emphasise this notion throughout the book. Women's pride in their family is founded on their obligations to them. Humans have valued marriage since the beginning of time. Marriage is regarded as a ceremonial as well as a sacramental union, according to V.V. Rao and V. Nandhini.

It is a significant event in Hinduism. However, as it turned out, ambitious women were duped by this marriage. In Indian society, a woman's life is frequently governed by men in positions of authority—her spouse as an adult, and her father when she was a child. This situation exemplifies the traditional status of women, who, after marriage, were frequently relegated to subservient roles, mainly handling household chores and childbearing. Even with numerous revolutions and advancements, women, who constitute over half of the global population, still face inequality compared to men.

Women are expected to serve, sacrifice, submit, and put up with whatever injustices against them in this culture ruled by men. Egotism becomes their way of life since their actual selves are hardly acknowledged. It is rightly observed, “Women are not only important but quite an essential part of human civilization and society. That society or community is undoubtedly sick and rotting, where women are oppressed” (Medhavi and Sahay 192). Without their husbands, women are viewed as incomplete, and they are constantly expected to comply with their husbands' requests. Though they are not seen as equals, they have the same moral and spiritual strength as men. The socioeconomic difficulties, however, made educated women leave their homes and realize that they were capable of more than just cleaning and cooking. Women's roles in the home and in society have come to light as a result of this increased awareness. With their determination to struggle for equal treatment with men and their current assertion of human rights, these women are starting a major societal shift.

Devi's grandma in the novel is a claver but illiterate woman from an age that followed the example set by men and accepted male dominance. She was a widow in her early thirties and resided in a small home in Agraharam. She and Devi developed a close emotional bond in spite of her situation. She looked forward to seeing Devi every summer, crying with happiness as she helped her out of her father's car. She would always start by expelling any spirits that Devi and her family might have brought from the city by drawing circles in the air with a bowl of water laced with turmeric and then spilling it into the street before allowing them to enter.

Devi's family had a distinct summer experience because of Devi's grandmother. Many women oppressed by a patriarchal society found solace in her house. Orphans, destitute women, the underprivileged, widows, and anyone in need of safety, support, and direction were all

welcomed. As Hariharan puts it: "Five months old and weak, she welcomed many more wounded refugees into her home, wandering for charity" (Hariharan 39). The grandmother's position as a ray of hope and kindness in a society that frequently treats women cruelly is highlighted in this novel.

In an effort to impart life lessons to Devi, Devi's grandma would often regale her with tales of ancient mythological ladies. She read aloud with great pleasure the stories of Damayanti, Ganga, and Amba. Devi's grandmother told her stories mostly to educate her about the lives of these remarkable women who enhanced Indian tradition with their high moral standards and lofty goals, preparing Devi for her upcoming responsibilities as a bride and mother. Devi was profoundly affected by these mythological tales, even though her impression of them was limited by her immature mind. The desperation of patriarchal society to portray women and girls as mere objects to be married off without taking into account their preferences was exposed by them. These tales stressed that the ideal bride should cheerfully accept her husband—who may be a serpent.

Mayamma is an uneducated woman from the generation that supports male dominance, just as Devi's grandmother. Mayamma is an elderly household maid who embodies the archetype of the selfless lady who accepts her lot in life and works hard at her job. As a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and finally as a forsaken woman, she experiences the anguish caused by patriarchal households. Mayamma was married off by her father as a young girl to a guy from a nearby hamlet. Mayamma, who was too young and illiterate, was married into a traditional Indian family where her mother-in-law always had the upper hand.

The transition of the Indian woman from a single, imagined identity to a more varied and multifaceted one can be observed in the larger change in the humanities and social sciences. This change replaces the inflexible, binary structuralist paradigm with a postmodern strategy that is more flexible and nuanced. The way that Indian women have been portrayed over the years appears to have been shaped by the changing identities of Indian women as well as the dominant theoretical frameworks. It is crucial to look at the power relations that support and sustain the 'othering' of Indian women, which happens when they are the subject of scholarly inquiry on a regular basis. In this context, Subhadra Channa Pens down that “The Devī is a woman with a

large bindi on her forehead, wearing a saree and fair in complexion. She is sexually passive, gentle and self sacrificing, monogamous, looking upon the face of the only one man in her life, her husband, and she is the repository of the honour of the family" (Channa 37).

Mayamma's mother-in-law had consulted many astrologers prior to her marriage, and they had all told her that the future daughter-in-law will have robust and healthy children. However, Mayamma's mother-in-law lost her tolerance and made her life even more difficult after a few years of marriage with no symptoms of motherhood. Mayamma lived a life of abstinence and extreme penances throughout her youth, all in the hopes of bearing fruit and carrying on the family line. Mayamma remembered a distressing event and said:

> "You have been admiring your fine new sari, have you? continued the mocking voice. What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch? 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. The next time it was my breast. 'Cut the right one open, here, take this blade. Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam. No, no, Maya. No rice for you today. It's Friday. No rice today, no vegetables tomorrow, no tamarind the day after. Stop thinking of food, daughter-in-law, think of your womb. Think of your empty, rotting womb and pray." (Hariharan 114).

Mayamma is cruelly tormented by her mother-in-law and husband for not having a son, which makes her a victim of social pressures. She never challenged her family, never spoke up, and never tried to leave her home, which was patriarchal. With time, Mayamma gradually acquired the ability to survive. She came to the realization that a woman can devote her entire being to serve her family, but even so, she would still be insignificant in her own household after going through these terrible experiences.

It is an obvious and well-lit path that a woman must take to get to paradise. She is respected in the heavens for her service to her husband; she has no autonomous sacrifice, vow, or fast to fulfill. After her husband passes away, the childless chaste woman, who had established

chastity, enters paradise akin to disciplined students. Devi's father-in-law, who initially seems like a decent man, teaches her the duties of a good wife. However, in a twist of fate, his own wife, Parvatamma, abandoned him and their children to follow her spiritual path. According to Mayamma, the maid, Parvatamma felt oppressed by her husband and sought her own liberation. She wrote a letter to her husband during his absence, entrusted it to Mayamma, and departed. Embracing her freedom, she chose her own direction, ultimately finding her identity and desires. Her permanent departure marked her new life, with only her death bringing her back to her home.

Devi finds Parvatamma mysterious and compares her to her grandma. Devi believes that Parvatamma was more aspirational. “She had deprived herself of the life assigned to her, the life of a householder, much like a man in a self-absorbed quest for a deity” (Hariharan 64). Mayamma was slow to forgive Parvatamma for what she considered to be her betrayal. But after hearing Baba's Manu-inspired stories, Devi realizes that women have the same right to pursue spiritual salvation and is sympathetic to Parvatamma's plight.

Devi felt imprisoned in her role as a wife and believed that adultery was her only way out. She ultimately decided to leave Mahesh because neither of them could be what the other needed. She chose to run away with Gopal, seeking happiness and freedom, believing they would have a wonderful life together. Gopal made her feel more comfortable than Mahesh ever did. She traveled with Gopal on all his musical tours, but after a few months, Devi realized she no longer enjoyed his presence. She grew dissatisfied with Gopal when he couldn't provide the peace of mind she desired. As Gopal's success grew, Devi's sense of alienation increased. She was heartbroken when Gopal revealed his future plans: “Let’s celebrate. If everything goes well, your panditji will be in America next month. Eight cities in three months, all expenses paid” (Hariharan 134). Devi saw that Gopal was as dedicated to his music as Mahesh was to his business, leaving her feeling further isolated and disillusioned.

The book ends with a sense of an unbroken future: "With a suitcase in hand, Devi opened the gate and peered wonderment at the garden, which was lush despite its roots choked with sand. The garden was wild and overgrown." She then accelerated her pace upon hearing the soft, youthful veena notes beckoning her inside the home" (Hariharan 139). Devi goes back to her

mother in search of her own identity, despite her inability to discover a meaningful purpose in life.

To put it simply, literature's examination of identity and belonging enhances our understanding of the human condition and ignites discussions about diversity, inclusivity, and social justice. These literary topics are essential because they speak to the fundamental human need to comprehend oneself and build meaningful relationships with others. In the end, this broadens our outlook on life and encourages critical analysis of our own identities and connections.

Through these stories, Hariharan critiques the rigid frameworks within which women's identities are often confined, while also celebrating the resilience and adaptability that allow them to redefine themselves in the face of adversity. The novel ultimately portrays identity as a multifaceted and dynamic construct, shaped by a multitude of influences—cultural, familial, and personal—and constantly evolving in response to the changing circumstances of life. In '*The Thousand Faces of Night'*, Githa Hariharan presents identity not as a fixed entity but as a fluid and complex tapestry, where the past and present, the individual and collective, are inextricably intertwined.

At the end it can be mentioned that we see a thorough examination of the paradoxes and complexity present in the quest for self-identity in a patriarchal culture. Hariharan explores the varied and complex experiences of women over generations, showing their fights for survival, independence, and individuality through the linked lives of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma. By contrasting the harsh realities these women endure with traditional tales and mythological legends, the novel creates a complex tapestry that highlights the conflict between societal standards and personal goals. Therefore, a search for identity within the confines of cultural expectations and familial responsibilities is a defining feature of each character's journey. Hariharan does a fantastic job of illustrating how the search for identity is a complicated dance between internal wants and outside forces rather than a straightforward path. Devi's return to her mother in the end represents a cyclical yet forward-moving search for identity, highlighting the fact that this is a continuous and changing process. Ultimately, *Thousand Faces of Night* is a

moving reminder of how resilient and complex women's identities can be in the face of persistent social pressures.

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