

Feministic View in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

D. Raghavendra Reddy,

*Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Comparative Literature, S.K. University,
Ananthapuramu*

Abstract

The term 'feminism' tends to be used for the women's movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. Despite the progress of the world, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. Indian writers,



especially women writers, have presented the suffering, agony, and grief of women and their attempts to revolt against the system and the society. Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapur are some of the Indian English women novelists who recorded feminist perspectives in their writings. Besides these, Githa Hariharan, a post-modern Indian English women novelist, has occupied a significant place among Indian women writers committed to feminist and social issues. A close study of her novels reveals her attempt in presenting the reality of the women of today's generation.

The present paper aims to make a study on Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* that portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. It depicts the dilemma of Devi, the protagonist of the novel, who undergoes suffering in the hands of her husband and how tries to fight for her individuality.

Key Words: Feminism, post-modern, Hariharan, modernity, individuality

Feministic View in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

D. Raghavendra Reddy,

*Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Comparative Literature, S.K. University,
Ananthapuramu*

Suffering has become a part of women living in almost all parts of the world in spite of drastic change and development took place in society. Men always believe that women should be brushed aside like 'weaker vessels' and should be "treated as *squirrels* in the Ibsenian sense or *decoys* in the sense of Elfriede Jelinek."¹ Men often consider as inferior creatures though women "have exhibited physical and intellectual abilities equal with men and achieved fame in all the fields."²

Feminism, as women's liberation movement, began in the Western World in the 1960s aiming at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women. Slowly the movement spread to different parts of the world including India that "focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the workforce and right to political parity."³ Despite the fight made by Indian feminists and their movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. Indian writers, especially women writers, have presented the suffering, agony, and grief of women and their attempts to revolt against the system and the society. Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapur are some of the Indian English women novelists who recorded feminist perspectives in their writings.

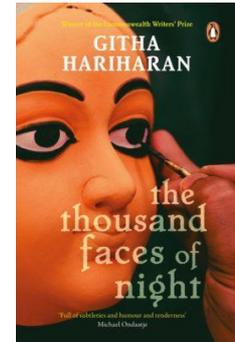
Besides these, Githa Hariharan, a post-modern Indian English women novelist, has occupied a significant place among Indian women writers committed to feminist and social issues. A close study of her novels reveals her attempt in presenting the reality of the women of today's generation. They truly manifest seeds of feminism deeply rooted in her philosophical base. In a question raised by Arnab Chakladar whether she can be described as a 'woman writer,' Githa Hariharan replied thus:

There are two questions here. Am I a writer particularly concerned with “women's issues”? And am I a feminist? The answer to both questions is yes. I want to make it quite clear that in my life my choices have been dictated by what I perceive as the feminist choice. ... And anyway, however you define yourself, all our work is informed in some way or the other by feminism, along with the ideas of Freud and Marx. And this goes for both men and women, of course. So ... I am a writer (as opposed to a woman writer) who is a feminist, along with several other things.⁴

Born in 1954 in Coimbatore, grew up in Mumbai (then Bombay) and Manila, graduated at Bombay University, mastered Arts from Fairfield University, Githa Hariharan challenged the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act as discriminatory against women and won the right to have the children named after her, instead of carrying the father's name. She started her career as a Staff writer in WNET Channel 13 in New York. But later she returned to India and joined as Editor in the Mumbai, Chennai, and New Delhi offices of Orient Longman where she was kept in-charge of fiction and women's studies. Perhaps this has given scope to become a voracious reader and remain as a writer with concern and cultural commentator.

Githa Hariharan has written novels, short fiction, children's stories, and essays over the last three decades. She is the author of seven novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), *The Ghosts of Vast Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009), and *I have Become the Tide* (2019), two anthologies of Short Stories *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* (1993), *Almost Home: Cities and Other Places* (2014), two Anthologies of Children Stories *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997), *The Winning Team* (2004). She has edited three books entitled *A Southern Harvest* (1993), *From India to Palestine: Essays in Solidarity* (2014), and *Battling for India: A Citizen's Reader* (2019). Her fiction has been translated into several languages such as French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Greek, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

Githa Hariharan's first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*⁵ is highly acclaimed and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. The novel sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. It depicts the dilemma of the female characters of three different generations having different lifestyles – self-sacrificing Mayamma, assertive Sita, and rebellious Devi. By and large, all the three found themselves trapped in the cobweb designed for women by men under the pretext of social conditioning. Arvind Mehrotra says that the novel deals with “the positioning of Indian Women in relation to this orientalist idea of tradition. Hariharan herself returned to India after attending graduate school in the United States and this novel is an account of the foreign returned Devi's attempt to find a way of living in contemporary India.”⁶



The novel is divided into three parts followed by Prelude that sets the tone and focus of the theme, i.e. Mayamma's tales of suffering and Devi's journey into life. At the beginning of the novel, Devi appears as a young girl with a modern outlook. She lives in America and loves an American boy, Dan. But at the same time, she worships her mother in the temple of her heart. She is well aware of this unforgettable reality that her traditional mother and her open-minded boyfriend would never come to terms with each other. “Dan was different. His charm lay in the vast distance they have travelled towards each other, and in Devi's awareness that this distance was not, would not be, completely bridged. This awareness hovered over them like a memory, protective because it remained undiminished” (*TTFN*, 5).

Devi returns to Madras from America with intending to live with Sita, her mother. Initially, she is confronted by some difficulties in making adjustments with day-to-day realities. She learns that it is difficult to change the good-old Indian set order with her modern ideas. She decides to live in India to look after her mother as both of them are pulled together like a one-celled unit. “Sita becomes her anchor, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of our existence” (*TTFN*, 16).

Soon Devi marries Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company, who often goes on long-tours for weeks together on company work. Even then she

tries to accommodate and adjust herself as a wife and live according to the expectations of her husband. She develops a kind of positive impression on Mahesh especially when he speaks about marriage. But very soon, she realizes the fact that Mahesh too is an Indian male who treats women as an object. She thinks that she has been cheated by Mahesh with his cold and indifferent attitude. At last, she fails to adjust herself thoroughly to a traditional life as she has been influenced by the modernist ideas of the west which she learnt during her study and stay abroad. She loses her identity as a wife, as a lover, and above all as a woman in the Indian male-oriented society. She feels that marriage is a torture and it hangs like a knife above her neck. She says

I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush. ... The games it plays with me are ignominious. ... The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (*TTFN*, 54)

Devi develops a kind of hatred towards her husband when he entertains his friends by turning the house a place for parties and playing cards. At one level, she grows wild in her fantasies and seeks an escape in her weird imaginings. Slowly, her marital life loses its brightness and excitement that once she had. At a crucial moment of introspection, she expresses her feelings on life in a monologue. She reflects on her life thus:

This then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in a 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. (*TTFN*, 54)

Devi believes that this situation has arisen because her education has not prepared her to play the role of a wife. Her aversion on Mahesh further increases when he responds to the question raised by her. She asks “Why did you marry me?” and his reply is “Whatever people get married for ... Thank God, we Indians are not obsessed with love” (*TTFN*, 55). She is defenseless against Mahesh’s supreme confidence and superciliousness. She hates being compelled to follow her husband’s “self-contained footprints, with clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves” (*TTFN*, 84). At last, she liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play to attain a state of free and creative individuality. She also thinks that her walking out of Mahesh’s life is her ‘first real journey’.

Devi is the representative of present-day intellectual women. She fails, confronts loneliness and alienation. Unable to understand imponderable man-woman relationships, she feels that she has an ephemeral existence. She has a mundane attitude towards her lover or husband and fails to connect with them mentally or emotionally. The lack of commitment that characterizes Devi’s intimate relationships with men is probably her reaction to her mother’s smothering control of every relationship in the family.

Devi refuses to take control of anything or anyone in her life. She has no initiative, no urge to do anything, and waits passively for others to arrange her life. The one redeeming feature in Devi’s character is her interrogative spirit which eventually prods her out of the life of lethargic material comforts and puts her on the quest for identity.

Finally, Devi returns to her mother and she aims to make a fresh beginning. What happens in the future is a question unanswered by the novelist. The characters in her novel truly represent various cross-sections of Indian society. Hariharan seems to suggest that Devi and Sita create the space between them to stand face to face to empower each other. The author creates a sisterhood among women who share the same existential crises, and she creates a new bodily image different from the bleeding female bodies defiled or isolated or exploited for reproduction. Instead, she shows

desiring female bodies met in 'blood and sweat' through intoxicatingly erotic rituals.

Ohira aptly remarks thus:

Hariharan's depiction of a bleeding community of women allows for the endless multiplication of differences among women, but it is strategically powerful as an image of a communion in which women can share their painful or joyful experiences and understand their bodies, a communion that allows women to rebel against a repressive system and to build on their new empowerment.⁷

To conclude, one may say that *The Thousand Faces Night* records the struggle of women for their survival in their relationship with men and society. It reveals more than a thousand faces of women who are still struggling for their survival in the dark with despair and displeasure in the patriarchal society. It also presents how women have been subjected to awe and rickety, distorted, dehumanized, injured and bleeding lots altogether. Devi, Sita, and Mayamma are the three women who walk a tightrope and thrash about for some balance for some means of survival they could incline for themselves. Vijayasree comments thus:

In working with the new feminist language of matrilineal transmission, Hariharan reinterprets and reenergizes the archetypes of mother and child from the perspective of feminist sisterhood.⁸

References

1. Kumar, Jeevan .T. “Black Feminist Consciousness: Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, Vol. IV, Issue II, April 2013, p.1.
2. Sailaja, G., and K. Gopal Reddy. “Objectification of Women in Tendulkar’s *Kamala*.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, Vol. 7, Issue 6, June 2019, p.293.
3. Wikipedia, “Feminism in India.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism_in_India. Retrieved on 09 December 2019.
4. Chakladar, Arnab. A Conversation with Githa Hariharan. *Another Subcontinent – South Asian Society and Culture*, 2005. <http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/gh2.html>
5. Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. New Delhi: Viking, 1993. Subsequent page references appear in the body of the article are from this edition.
6. Mehrotra, Arvind. *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008.
7. Ohira, Eiko. “Redeeming Bleeding: The Representation of Women in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*.” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, January 2012.
8. Vijayasree, C. “Re-visionist Myth-making: A Reading of Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*”. *The Postmodern Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990*. Ed. Viney Kirpal. New Delhi: Allied, 1996. 176-181.