

Rewriting the Epics: A Feminist Reading of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract:

This study presents a critical analysis of Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. It emphasises on the reinterpretation of Indian epics, myths, and the notion of motherhood from a feminist perspective. The novel effectively connects together ancient mythological stories with the real-life experiences of Indian women, focussing on the central character Devi and other characters such as Sita and Mayamma. Hariharan employs these characters to explore the ways in which mythic traditions influence and often restrict female identity within patriarchal structure. This paper uses feminist literary theory, particularly focussing on Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as "the Other" and Julia Kristeva's notion of the maternal, to highlight the portrayal of motherhood not merely as a sacred duty, but rather as a burden, a means of survival. As the structure of the novel has fragmented nature and interweaving of narratives from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and various folktales, it encourages an exploration through a postmodern and postcolonial lens. The concept of myth is not static; it is reinterpreted to challenge traditional notions of femininity, selflessness, and obedience. The study takes the theories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak to explore the intersections of gender, tradition, and voice. A comprehensive look unveils that storytelling serves as a means of expressing female agency and resistance. The paper employs qualitative analysis of content and intertextual theory to examine the reinterpretation of myth and epic narratives. It emphasizes the inner conflicts, desires, and suppressed voices of women. Through this approach, the novel critiques conventional gender roles. Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* stands out as a compelling narrative that challenges cultural memory and reinterprets motherhood in ways that validate female identity and resilience.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Myth, Gender, Women.

The Thousand Faces of Night (1992) is Githa Hariharan's first novel. It tells the story of three generations of women—Devi, Sita, and Mayamma—who deal with the demands of society, gender roles, and the limits of patriarchal culture. Set in both modern and traditional India, the book mixes personal experiences with echoes of old Indian myths, epics, and folktales. Through Devi's journey—from her schooling in the US to her return to India and her eventual rejection of traditional domesticity—the writer questions the restrictions placed on women and highlights their fight for independence and identity. The book is more than just a personal story of resistance and self-discovery. It is a cultural commentary on how women have been suppressed in both literature and life throughout history. For a long time, myths and epics have been important parts of culture that shape how people think and behave. But these stories typically

show women in limited positions, as obedient wives, self-sacrificing mothers, or temptresses, which are very patriarchal values. To confront and break down the ideas that still shape gender norms, it is important to rethink these classic writings from a feminist point of view. Writers can show the gaps, omissions, and marginalisations in traditional depictions by recounting these stories from women's points of view. These new interpretations not only challenge the validity of stories that are told mostly by men, but they also bring back lost or silenced female experiences and perspectives, giving us new ideas about power, agency, and subjectivity. This paper looks at how Githa Hariharan rewrites Indian epics and myths in *The Thousand Faces of Night* to put women's voices, experiences, and perspectives at the centre of the story. By mixing mythical stories with the real lives of her female characters, Hariharan fights against patriarchal readings of ancient literature and takes them back as means of feminist resistance. This study will look at how the novel criticises traditional ideas of womanhood and celebrates female agency using ideas from feminist criticism and postcolonial thought.

The Thousand Faces of Night by Githa Hariharan is a strong feminist retelling of Indian mythology in which she goes against the patriarchal stories that have kept women's voices quiet for a long time. Hariharan challenges the prevalent male-centered perceptions by going back to and reworking mythic stories from the Mahabharata and other classical traditions. She shows how these stories maintain gender hierarchies and limit women's freedom. Her new version of the story gives a voice to the women who are generally left out of these stories, such as Gandhari, Amba, and Sita. She shows them as complicated people with inner power, emotional depth, and the ability to fight back. In this context, Hariharan also changes the way we think about mothers and traditional gender roles. Using Julia Kristeva's ideas about motherhood, she shows maternal figures not as static emblems of sacrifice and care, but as women who have been transformed by pain, endurance, and small acts of defiance. The book also deals with important postcolonial feminist issues, especially those brought up by theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Hariharan criticises both Western feminist essentialism and indigenous patriarchy, showing how women in postcolonial India are doubly pushed to the edges of society by colonial legacies and by traditional norms.

Githa Hariharan uses Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana as intertextual frameworks to question deeply rooted patriarchal standards in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. She does this from a feminist and postcolonial point of view. Instead of seeing these epics as unchanging sources of moral guidance, Hariharan sees them as places where women's voices have been historically pushed to the side or muted. Meenakshi Bharat says that Hariharan "reclaims epic and myth not to affirm tradition but to destabilise its gendered authority" (Bharat 115). Hariharan uses different narrative techniques to connect mythical stories with the lives of current Indian women. She draws a link between the challenges of epic heroes and the lives of women today. It's not just that Gandhari, Sita, and Draupadi are told again; they are also given new meanings. Gandhari's blindfold, which is commonly considered as a sign of devotion to her husband, is shown as a forced silence, a way of hiding that is similar to how women are trained

to be invisible. In the same way, Hariharan does not portray Sita as the perfect example of morality, but as a woman who finally rejects society's judgement by returning to the dirt, which is a strong act of refuse. Draupadi's pain, especially her humiliation in the Kaurava court, is used in the book as a symbol of the trauma that women pass down from one generation to the next. This shows how violence and endurance are both cyclical. K. Suneetha Rani says that "Hariharan's Draupadi becomes a symbol of female rage and suppressed resistance, a figure whose story is revived to expose ongoing injustices against women" (Rani 78). Hariharan's use of these archetypes is not just symbolic; it is also political. She questions the traditional view of feminine virtue as being patient, quiet, and suffering. Instead, her female characters are all about thought, introspection, and standing up for what they believe in. Devi, the main character, goes through layers of myth and memory to figure out who she is as a person. Her grandmother's stories full of myths aren't teachings; they're ways for women to share their experiences. According to Suchitra Mathur, Hariharan "uses myth as a narrative strategy to question, reinterpret, and rewrite history from a woman-centered perspective" (Mathur 55). Hariharan offers voice to people who have been on the edges for a long time through her female characters, especially Mayamma and Sita (the mother). She gives them not only room but also power.

Simone de Beauvoir famously said in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She said that womanhood is not an inherent identity but a social construct (Beauvoir 283). The idea that women are seen as "Other" in a patriarchal system where men are the leader, is the centre of her thesis. This idea is quite similar to what Githa Hariharan wrote in the novel, where women like Devaki, Sita, and even minor female characters are often portrayed as "the Other"—subordinate, submissive, and defined by their relationships with males. These women are not allowed to be themselves or make their own choices. Instead, they are created by society expectations based on mythology and family duty. Hariharan shows Devaki and Sita as cultural archetypes that have been formed by years of patriarchal rhetoric. Devaki, who represents the quiet mother figure, supports the idea that giving up and suffering are good things for women, just like the fabled Sita, who goes through trials by fire to prove her chastity. Both characters are forced into male-defined positions as self-sacrificing wives and mothers, which takes away their individuality. Hariharan questions the lasting impact of these myths by recreating these legendary heroes. She shows how marriage and motherhood are ways for men to control women. Nivedita Menon says that "the institution of marriage becomes a site where women are continually positioned as the repository of familial honour and cultural purity" (Menon 47). Chandra Talpade Mohanty also criticises these kinds of constructions for making the female experience seem universal and warns against essentialist readings of womanhood (Mohanty 72). Hariharan's characters fit with these feminist critiques since they are held back by societal norms that idealise women's silence and subordination. In the book, marriage isn't a place where two people work together; it's a place where they are trapped. Sita's retreat into music is her sole way to express herself, which is a symbolic act of quiet defiance. Devaki's acceptance of her job as a caretaker shows not only generational pain but also how patriarchal ideas have been ingrained in

her. Beauvoir talks about the "internal colonisation" of women's psyche, where women are taught to tolerate and even praise their own marginalisation. These characters are good examples of this. So, Hariharan's feminist intervention is in how she shows these mechanisms and how she reimagines women's experiences as ones of hidden resistance and complicated inner lives.

Julia Kristeva's ideas about the maternal and the semiotic provide a useful way to look at how motherhood and women's point of view are shown in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Kristeva makes a distinction between the symbolic, which has to do with language, law, and patriarchy, and the semiotic, which has to do with the pre-Oedipal, the maternal body, and nonverbal forms of communication including rhythms, tones, and gestures. In this view, the maternal is not just biological; it is also a place where people fight back against the phallogocentric system. In Hariharan's book, mother figures like Sita and Devi's grandmother are more than just carers; they also carry cultural memories and ways of expressing themselves. Sita's trained silence seem to represent the patriarchal standard that has become ingrained in her. But underneath this quiet is a suppressed mother voice that is both subtle and strong. Devi's grandmother, on the other hand, represents the semiotic through her stories, oral traditions, and magical tales that have been passed down through the generations. Her voice not only brings back memories, but it also challenges them, creating a space where women's subjectivity can be expressed. The conflict between silence and voice becomes important. Women may be muted in the symbolic order, but they find methods to speak through the semiotic: dreams, stories, feelings, and non-linear thought. Devi's inner voice and broken ideas also show this semiotic process as she tries to make sense of her broken identity. Through these motherly characters and storytelling techniques, Hariharan uses Kristeva's semiotic domain to question hegemonic discourses and give women back their power in places where they have remained quiet in the past.

The important article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions the power systems that keep marginalised voices quiet, especially those of colonised women. According to Spivak, the subaltern is someone who is spoken for and not often allowed to speak for herself. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, this idea of quiet subalternity is reflected in the lives of characters like Mayamma, whose pain is not talked about in mainstream conversations, and Devi, who could break this silence. Devi's thoughts and feelings about herself and her return to storytelling are important ways for her to get her voice back. By selecting narrative as a way to express herself, she fights against the silence that patriarchal and postcolonial systems force on people. In Hariharan's novel, storytelling becomes a powerful instrument that lets women rewrite their stories, fight against being erased, and make their presence known. In this way, Devi might be understood as a "speaking subaltern," moving from silence to self-expression, which is similar to Spivak's appeal for the recovery of subaltern agency in the postcolonial feminist framework.

Githa Hariharan looks at how resistance, identity, and freedom interact in the lives of women living in a patriarchal culture in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Devi, the main character, is on a journey to find her own identity. Her first acceptance of her roles as a good daughter, wife, and granddaughter shows how deeply ingrained societal conditioning is for women. As the story goes on, though, Devi's internal rebellion increases, fuelled by the legends of mythological women and maternal figures around her. This resistance eventually leads to her symbolic return. This return isn't just physical; it also means a spiritual and narrative rebirth, which shows that she has taken back her voice and power. Her leaving a bad marriage and facing the silence of her family are signs that she is breaking away from traditional norms and moving towards defining herself. This change is largely due to literature and myth. Hariharan gives Devi tools to fight back and change their own stories by reconstructing the lives of classic heroines like Draupadi and Sita. These intertexts are subversive tools that help women find strength, resonance, and ways to survive and be free. In the end, the book says that telling stories, both personal and mythological, is a way to fight against patriarchal erasure and provide people a place to put their broken identities back together.

In conclusion, *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan is a compelling retelling of mythology that puts women's voices front and centre, going against traditional patriarchal readings of stories. Hariharan shows how myth, culture, and society silence and erase women by reinventing ancient heroines like Sita, Gandhari, and Draupadi. Her stories allow female characters, especially Devi, the power to define themselves. They fight against the limits of marriage, motherhood, and duty. By combining Western feminist theories like Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as "Other," Julia Kristeva's semiotic and maternal lens, and postcolonial critiques by Gayatri Spivak, we can get a better understanding of how women's identities are formed and fought against in Indian society.

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