



# GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT* AS THE COMMEMORATION OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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**Abstract :** India is the cradle of civilization with great tradition and heritage. The ethnicity of this country is prolific with a lot of myths. Though there are many religions and linguistic variations, all people live in harmony. From this land the rest of the world learn unity in diversity. We have great saints and Rishis in our land who taught their people the art of living. We have a rich heritage of literary tradition. We have produced great epics of the world, i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata which invariably preach the principles of life to the people. Githa Hariharan uses the genre of fiction as a medium to transmit the culture to learners exhibiting the Indian myths in a detailed manner and proves myth making a survival strategy. She has represented the glory of India through her fiction. The present research article focuses on the marriages, old traditional values, story and myth, passion and loneliness in the lives of Indian women as Githa Hariharan aptly handles all this issues in her award- winning novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Survival, Traditional Values, Marriage, Myth

Women who constitute half of the world's population are paradoxically not treated with men in all spheres of human activity. There were considered as commodity. Githa Hariharan in her present novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* dwells into the psyche of subjugated women who struggle to establish their self in a male dominated set up. Under the patriarchal structure, woman's manner, her very soul and ideas are modified by the constant pleasures of masculine standards. Woman has always been projected as subordinate and inferior. The bias against woman can be seen right away from the day of creation. It is said that God created man in his own image. The suggestion is that God is male. Further, it is said that God, after creating man, made woman from the rib of man. As Adam, the first man on the earth, remarks about Eve: "this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman. Because she was taken out of man" (Krishnaswamy 73).

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She talks about the contemporary women's problems in love, sex and marriage with greater confidence. She articulates these issues with the help of Indian Mythology. She presents the Indian myths taken from Ramayana and Mahabharata and relates them to the women characters.

For centuries, the Hindu woman glorified the mythical models from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Puranas. Indian women were asked to get inspired by the archetype women like Sita and Savitri. Githa Hariharan selected the less important prominent figures from the Indian epics and Puranas. She talks about Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who are less known to the contemporary learners instead of talking about Sita and Savitri. She talks about Indian myths which are forgotten by many of us. She makes ingenious use of Indian myths for plot-development and characterization in the novel. Myth is a traditional or legendary story, usually concerned with deities or demi-gods, sacred beings or great heroes. Myths as an integral part of literature have always had a privileged place.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* revolves around three women characters -- Devi, the Central Character; Sita, her mother and Mayamma, the care taker cum cook. She in her novel has concerned with the inner life of woman through three generations. Each has her own life story to tell. The opening of *The Thousand Faces of Night* strikes the keynotes of the fundamental problem i.e. the conditioning of a girl child. Women especially mothers and grandmothers show concern in encouraging their daughters to follow the stereotypes. The myths of Amba, Gandhari, Ganga and others are built up and repeated to promote the traditional image of woman that leads to selfless behaviour and in turn insensitivity to injustice. Indian mothers raise and treat fairly their daughters on all their endeavours. With their mother's inspiration and emotional support, they internalize their femininity.

Sita decides to call her daughter Devi back from America in order to settle her in India through the knot of marriage. After arriving in India, she realizes that her motive is going to arrange her marriage through swayamvara. Marriage is considered as a traditional role

of woman in Indian society. However, Devi is not interested to marry, she accepts the proposal of her mother because she does not want to hurt the feelings of her mother. The mother “weaves a cocoon a secure womb” (TFN 13). At this point Devi recollects her grandmother’s story of Damayanti that was taken from the Mahabharata. Nala, the king of Nishad was brave, handsome and virtuous. Damayanti’s father decided holding her swayamvara. Damayanti was brave and determined to espouse Nala. So she threw the garland around his neck and espoused him amidst all the intrigues made even by the gods. Her grandmother concludes the story with a moral, “A woman gets her heart’s desire by great cunning” (TFN 20). The story of Nala-Damayanti fascinated her. From this story Devi established the concept of Swayamvara.

The next story narrated by her grandma is about Gandhari who plays a magnificent role in the Mahabharata. Gandhari was married to a very rich prince, whose Palace was “twice as big twice as magnificent as her parents Palace” (TFN 28). On all the ways he is very rich and “the Marble Pillars Shone like Mirrors” (TFN 28), whereas on meeting her husband for the first time in such a rich palace, she was taken aback for “The White eyes the pupils glazed and useless” (TFN 29). Gandhari in anger vowed never to see again the world; so she bound her eyes with the help of a veil. Summing up the story Devi’s grandmother says: “she embraced her destiny--a blind husband with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (TFN 29). Through this story Devi learnt life through her grandmother’s choice of Gandhari and acclaims:

“The lesson brought me five steps close to adulthood. I saw for the first time that my parents too were afflicted by a kind of blindness. In their blinkered world they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another” (TFN 29).

Gandhari’s story once again shed light on the life of Sita, Devi’s mother. Before Marriage her parents taught her to play veena. She entered her husband’s house with a veena as part of her dowry. After completing the household affairs, which was considered as the foremost duty of the house-wives, she used to play veena. One day her father-in-law called her for performing some works before puja in morning. She could not hear, as she was playing veena. The father-in-law scolded Sita. “Put the veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law” (TFN 30)? In a momentary anger and frustration, she pulled out the strings of veena and vowed not to play the veena again and replied in a whisper: “yes, I am a wife and a daughter-in-law” (TFN 30).

Another significant story told her by her grandma deals with a beautiful girl who married a snake. Although Devi’s immature mind cannot decode the real purpose underlying the story, it etched in her memory as a story throughout her life. A childless couple prays to God for a child and in return a snake is born to them. When the snake grew up, the parents planned a marriage. He walked to the distant lands in search of a bride. When the host learns that he is in search of a girl for his venom tongued son who is in the shape of a snake, he readily offered his gorgeous daughter. The girl on seeing the snake as her husband, she whole-heartedly accepted her lot, saying “A girl is given only once in Marriage” (TFN 33). One night the serpent came into her room and spent a night with her. Next morning when she woke up, surprisingly she found a handsome young man on her bed. The story delineates the Hindu concept of rebirth. Devi co-relates the story with the lot of the servant maid, Gauri.

As the grandmother grew older, stories also took a new shape. “The grandmother’s stories became sharper, more precarious tone of dangerous possibilities” (TFN 35). This time grandmother dwells upon Mahabharata for a story and she talks about Amba. Prince Bheeshma goes to a swayamvara of three beautiful princesses. Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Amba the eldest chose King Salwa and garlanded him. But suddenly Bheeshma kidnapped all the three princesses and took them to his step-mother. When they came to know that Amba had already married, they let her go to King Salwa.

Insulted Amba goes back to Bheeshma, who also refused to accept her thereby she changed her attitude towards life and vowed to avenge Bheeshma. She went to the forest and did penance towards Lord Shiva. Having been pleased with her penance, Lord Shiva gave her a garland and promised her: “Who so ever wears this garland will surely kill Bheeshma” (TFN 39). This story reared a brave attitude in Devi. “She day-dreamed more and more about female avengers” (TFN 40). These lessons indelibly imprint themselves in her mind. She confesses: “I lived a secret life of my own; I became a woman Warriors, a heroine, I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut of the evil magical demons heads” (TFN 41).

The most interesting story which has a message of motherhood is about Ganga and Shantanu. She says “Motherhood is more than the pretty picture you see of a tender woman bent over the baby she is feeding at her breast” (TFN 88). On walking along the bank of Ganges, King Shantanu happened to meet a beautiful damsel. He fell in love with her and in turn she had promised to marry him, provided he did not intercept her in her actions. However difficult, he accepted it. No sooner did she give birth to a child than she killed it drowning in river Ganges. She killed seven children. Shantanu could not approve of such conduct, but he remained silent for holding up the vow. Upon the birth of the eighth child, he could not refrain protesting her from drowning the child. The lady goes back to her normal form--river Ganges, saying: “Then take him be the father and mother to him” (TFN 88). She plunged into the river. There is a belief in the Hindu mythology that the water of Ganges purifies us of our sins for it flows from heaven. The lady plunged into the river to wash away her sins. After many years Devi could interpret the story and concludes: “To be a goodmother, to be a mother at all . . . you have to renew your wifely vows everyday” (TFN 88).

After marrying Mahesh, Devi meets her father-in-law, Baba and the caretaker-cum-cook in that home, Mayamma. The emotional and mental incompatibility with Mahesh brings her close to Baba. Baba talks about Manu, who is the creator of Hindu code of conduct. He teaches Devi what Brahminhood is. He tells Devi quoting from Manu, “A Brahmin . . . shrinks from honours as from poison; humility he covets as if it is nectar” (52). Baba dwells deep on the Vedas and Sanskrit hymns. Devi feels glad to be a disciple of such an intellectual man.

Therefore, the underlining theme in Githa Hariharan’s novels is human relationship, especially the one that exists between husband and wife and also between mother and daughter. In all these relationships the woman occupies the central stage and significantly the narration shifts through her feminist consciousness. In The Thousand Faces of Night, three types of suffering women characters persist with subtle changes. To the first type belongs the housemaid Mayamma –the traditional woman who believes that her only place is her husband and family’s home. Whatever be her troubles, she does not speak. In this sense, she respects the traditional religious ethos and confirms to the Manu code that the woman should be under control of the father in the maidenhood, the husband in the youth and sons during her old age. The second type of suffering woman is converse of the traditional type. Here, the woman is bolder, and rebellious. She cannot conform to the Sita’s version of womanhood. Such kind of woman is Devi, the protagonist who rejects the traditional roles of woman and rebel against patriarchal society. The third type of women characterizes the woman in between. This woman is neither traditional nor modern in her ideas and practice..

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