

## Quest for identity in Githa Hariharans “the thousand faces of night”

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### Abstract

India is one of the olden countries with rich heritage and traditional values. Woman in the country is known as mother, potential creator, and idolizing mother is integral part of Indian culture and societies. One of the new writers, attempting to engrave an alcove for her internationally, is Githa Hariharan who *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) has won the 1993 Common Wealth prize for the best first Novel from the Eurasian region. In this novel makes the reader to feel a mysterious experience, along with the protagonist, conventional from a woman's life. The novel bring alive the underworld of women's life. Hariharan defines significance and relevance of their suffering to the great epic periods of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata because from them Indian women appeal their life models. Her novels present three women whose different and yet similar stories cut across generation and cross walls of cast and class. The young upper class western educated Devi, her mother Sita and the lower class servant woman named Mayamma, have to contend with the same constricting rules of patriarchy. Hariharan is a complex experimentalist; she seems to have identified herself with Devi in order to decode her “feminist concern with emancipated women.” In short, the fiction is finally articulates the identity of Sita and Devi in Hariharans novel.

**Keywords:** heritage, traditional, githa hariharan

### Introduction

Identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and expressions that make a person's self-identity or group of particular social category or social group. The process of identity can be creative or destructive. Identity is a multidimensional word. In psychology and sociology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or associations such as national identity and cultural identity. Identity may be defined as the typical characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category. The term comes from the French word identity, which finds its linguistic roots in the Latin noun identities, itself a derivation of the Latin adjective idem meaning "the same". However, the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived. These others may be kind such that one aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs a process of idealistic-identification, or malign when one wishes to distance from their characteristics a process of defensive contra-identification (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2003). The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has experienced a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. Githa Hariharan novels create a space where the issue of woman and modernity can be discussed openly. But still there is angst that prevails throughout the novels regarding social and gender concept that rise as result of modernity. Her writing in 1992, Githa Hariharan in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female, independence, much remains to be done.

The fight for independence remains unfinished battle in her quest for identity. This identity crisis can be witnessed in the stylistic representations that Githa Hariharan has capably made.

The story of the novel centres on the character of Devi, who represents predicament in the mind of typical Indian women. Devi, after her post-tertiary education, from America comes home to Madras with the memory of her black American lover, Dan. In the novel, mainly discuss three female characters Devi the protagonist of the novel, Sita, Devi's mother and Mayamma, a housekeeper. This mythological story is relevant to the story of Sita, Devi's mother. When Devi was a child, she saw a photograph of her mother Sita, with a veena, a musical instrument, that she never saw before and when she tried to learn the facts, her grandmother narrated this story. The story goes like this: Sita brought along with her veena, when she came to the house of her in-law and she loved to play with it at her rest hours. Every time she played very beautifully and she was also appreciated. Once, while she was playing the veena very attentively forgetting everything, her father-in-law gave a mild, but firm warning against her not giving enough care and attention towards her house hold chores and duties upon the prisoners of the house. He also further questioned if she was really a wife and a daughter-in-law. After hearing these words from her father-in-law, Sita was dumbfounded and for some time she huge her head over the veena and finally, she pulled the strings out of the wooden base. Through the mouth of her grandmother, Devi heard the story of her mother as an act of repudiation of one's own interest which was similar to the vow taken up by Gandhari by blindfolding herself. From that day onwards, Sita stopped touching her veena and gave her time and energy as well as her powers of reasoning to make her husband a success in his professional life. She sacrificed everything and devoted

herself to keep up the prestige of the family as well as the fortunes of the family. Sita's behaviour and attitude was greatly appreciated by her husband Mahadevan, who became loyal to her. In the meantime, Sita learnt that her husband lacked high hope of life and this was totally opposite to her intention of facing the big trial awaiting her. At this particular stage of life, a daughter was born and she was devi. On seeing the baby, the mother's happiness knew no bounds. It seemed as if a new veena that she could play was found and this time she was not going to abandon it easily. The mother then controlled the grown up daughter Devi, very severely. At one time, sita, along with Mahadevan went to Africa on a prestigious overseas assignment with proper arrangements of the journey. And on the other hand, Devi was made to go to America. On reaching Africa, Mahadevan proved to be more exhausted than what Sita had thought. In his fifties, he was a sick old man and he had no taste of his time of beauty and energy. One day sita saw her husband on his chair with his head resting upon a quantity of papers on his desk and found him dead. She saw everything silently and without uttering a single word she burnt the papers and "in a modern, sanitized crematorium" (Hariharan 1992: 106) <sup>[1]</sup> the body was also burnt. Then, she came back to Madras the following day.

Now at this moment, Sita's entire hope was upon her only daughter, Devi. She wrote letters to call back her daughter at her home town. She then started looking for a person who could prove him-self to be an appropriate husband for her daughter. Finally, Mahesh was chosen and Devi was married to him. But all of a sudden, the promise Devi made to Sita received a brief telegram from Mahesh in Bangalore informing that Devi had run away and necessary action had been taken. Sita has at this point of time engulfed by violent passion because she was deceived. Her life was full of sacrifices and self- control. She tired from different angles to give the best possible that she could offer, to her daughter, with great planning. But in return, Devi gave her the impure name of a woman that had been uprooted. Sita wrote to Mahesh pleading him not to spread disgrace. Very unexpectedly after a huge gap of many years, she dusted the broken veena freshly and waited for her daughter as she was expected to come back to mother. And as expected, Devi came to her and on entering her house; she heard the faint sounds of a veena welcoming her.

The next female character of the novel is the protagonist of this novel, Devi. At the very beginning of this novel, Devi is shown to us as a foreign- returned young girl. She studied in America and it's all because of her mother Sita that Devi could study there. Living for quite some time in this advanced country, she could see and experience many development of this place. In the meantime, she had a relationship with black Dan, and she was even being proposed for marriage by him. At this stage Sita, her mother had been calling her back to India especially for her marriage to an Indian. Devi regarded her mother very highly and also out of her true and keen love for her mother, she came back to India. But returning to India, Devi could not adjust herself thoroughly to a traditional life as she had been influenced by the modernistic ideas of the west. Within the social structure of the male oriented society, Devi searches her identity, i.e. as a wife under an arranged marriage, or even as a rebellious lover. After her return to Madras to live with her widowed mother Site, Devi could not prepare herself for a future in India. In spite of being

influenced by modernistic ideas, she has to be engulfed by the tradition and old order of things in the solitary house by the sea side in the same way her mother did. Out of maternal love, she accepted an appropriate marriage for her. Devi was now married to her much admired man, Mahesh. But as time rolled on, she got a better experience day by day. While Mahesh was having a month long tour, Devi received an invitation from Gopal one of her neighbours to meet a singer. He was a forty years old man with a flashy appearance and she also felt his eyes caressing her body. She was not self-conscious and uncomfortable of her position in Gopal's household and she became totally devoted to the rich current of Gopal's voice.

After an act of perseverance and silence, Devi walked out from the life of Mashesh which gave a meaning to her life and she look it as her 'first real journey.' Gopal turned out to be a play with ambitions of an aristocratic way of life. Devi was disappointed and then she decided to run no further. Finally Devi made a choice of coming back to her mother to start a new lease of life "To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning." (Hariharan 1992: 139) <sup>[1]</sup> Devi could hear little unclear sounds of veena when she reached her mother's house in Madras. The sounds of the musical instrument seemed like "hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house." (Hariharan 1992:139) <sup>[1]</sup> Having learnt the unhappy news of Devi's elopement with Gopal, Sita knew that Devi would finally take her refuge to the mother and she was mentally prepared for this event. Sita, at this movement came out with her real self by finding out and bringing back the veena that she left long ago, and by keeping her daughter in an equal position. As a matter of fact, Sita, was not psychologically and emotionally ready to welcome her positively but realizing that they had the same fate and both of them suffered equally, she received her the only difference is that Sita had to face a terrible situation of her life in a more tradition-bound society which Devi had not and the family took the main responsibility in preventing her to realize her individuality. She had to suffer alone within her heart and did penance without uttering any word. On the other hand, in Devi's case the dual extents of cruel and unfair male ego, one of the indifferent attitudes of Mahesh and another of the loyalty of Gopal, stopped her modest and strong desire for success in her life.

The third female character of the said novel which is truly related to the theme is Mayamma. She is the housekeeper of Devi's in-laws i.e. Mahesh's family. She is portrayed as an ideal female character. As she could not find any alternative choice, she had to accept her fate, and though rude and offensive to it, she did not challenge to put it a matter of issue and she lived her life according to what had been expected from her. Society turned out to be very cruel to a women like Mayamma and she received its main blow as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and a mother.

Mayamma got married with all the boons and blessings from the priest at the age of 12. But day by day her husband turned out to be very dishonest. Again, mayamma's mother-in-law was truly concerned about the jewellery she was wearing. Days passed but Mayamma could bear no child and the mother-in-law started complaining and wished her to undergo penance. She also did enthusiastically. Time had passed in such a condition for ten long years and ultimately, the goddess heard her and a son was born to her on the auspicious day of Diwali, a day with light and firecrackers. Now, her husband in

his middle age, indulged himself in too much drinking and gambling beyond limits of reasonable behaviour. And once, he stole all the money in the house and was out of sight. At home she could find a carbon copy of her husband in the form of her son. Being the only earner of the family, she tired from different levels to earn though little, doing whatever she could. Her lazy son kept her quite busy and the son tortured her time and again. Just because of her refusal to give him her diamond earring that she kept as a treasure of her would-be-daughter-in-law, he hit the mother with an iron frying pan. She had to bear with this harsh pain also.

But again, Mayamma had to look after her son when he became ill with a high fever and this time with lack of pity, delicacy and kindness. He remained in such a condition for two months and the mother had to sit by him all night and had to clean him. The son now, for the first time, became a true son in the real sense of the term, and the mother had also a soft and tender feeling towards the son. His condition declined day by day and he was excited and he could not be saved. As Mayamma had to suffer untold miseries, she became the one without emotion but on the day the son died, she wept from the core of her heart. Remembering her youth and her husband she wept heartily as all these had been snatched from her since a long time. She burnt all the traces of the past along with the body of her son and left the village. She then came to parvatiamma's (Devi mother-in-law and Mahesh's mother) place to take shelter and thus she became the caretaker of the household.

She believed that her life was completely governed by gender and she narrated the story of her own life filled with distress, pain, discomfort and sorrow. It was truly aware of the fact that she had to suffer miseries which turned out to be a great boon of the society and her family. She was treated very cruelly by her husband and in addition to it by her worthless son too, and finally she could find shelter in the house of a well-to-do relative parvatiamma, who was the mother of Mahesh, Devi's husband. Physically weak and old Mayamma, presently perceived in her minds eyes the violent strength and physical action of goddess kali. As she could personally, not able to alter the progressive direction of fate, she silently and willingly agreed to play her part in society and she finally accepted that women have to experience physical and mental pain because they are women.

In spite of the fact that could do very little for her, she encouraged and even supported those female folks who had the similar fate with hers. Moreover she not only accepted Devi's decision of walking out of Mahesh's life, but also she even blessed and wished her. She thus she stopped to obey the old traditional values that prevented a woman to achieve her rights of making choices resulted from the ill-treatment of her family. Without making a mournful sound, she tolerated everything with a firm belief that the progress for the life a woman trusted on her capacity to tolerate everything with patience in this society dominated by male. Having a mind-set of this kind of life she, moreover, gave comfort to Devi. Mayamma, the oldest main female character in the novel was an uneducated woman and her existence was of no value to many and above all she suffered forcefully. It is an inherent feeling for a woman to have an excessive self-esteem of her sexuality but society stops her from search a feeling. The restrictions of the society truthfully do not allow most of the women to bring out clearly their womanless unlike their

motherhood. The Thousand Faces of Night, the very little of this novel clearly and also strongly shows with evidence the lives of different female characters where self-abnegation is involved.

In the story of the novel find not only Devi, but her mother Sita also experiencing a spiritual change thoroughly. They are fully aware that a woman is mainly not a wife or a mother but an individual in her own right. Dr. Padmini and S.K. Sudha have rightly observed that:

"In The Thousand Faces of Night Githa Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. She diligently captures their split consciousness as a result of which we find through a set of representative characters, both their submissiveness and their struggle for individuality." (Padmini and S.K. Sudha 126) [2].

On one hand, Devi could be personated as a symbol of the present day women with rational thinking and on the other hand, with great disappointment, she also comes face to face with loneliness and alienation. The Thousand Faces of Night also discusses about what a woman is generally considered to be in India. The success of this novel lies in the social realities mirrored by Githa Hariharan. Devi is depicted as an independent individual who does not fall prey to passive suffering. She is ready to reach compromise and adjustment with a sense of loss when she decides to stay with her mother, Sita. The novel presents Devi as a woman with whom one can identify-intelligent, questioning women, who are not content with statuesque. The protagonist finally disowns her status of 'other' finally to return to her mother or her roots to rediscover her true identity.

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