

Rewriting Myth: The Quest for Self-realisation in Githa Hariharan's *Thousand Faces of Night*

A. Deborah Joicy¹   & Dr S. Vennila²  

Abstract

Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night explores how women seek self-realisation in Indian society. The novel follows women as they face male-dominated norms, traditional expectations, and strict gender roles while searching for their own identity and freedom. Through the stories of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Hariharan explores the psychological, emotional, and social challenges women experience across generations. By drawing on myth, history, and cultural traditions, the novel reimagines women's lives to show their strength and resilience. The female characters balance duty and desire, silence and self-expression, showing that self-realisation is a journey of discovery, resistance, and empowerment. This article examines how Hariharan uses mythological references and realistic storytelling to question male-dominated systems and reshape women's identities in modern India. It argues that The Thousand Faces of Night is not just about women's suffering but is a powerful story of change, self-awareness, and the pursuit of freedom.

Keywords: Self-realisation, Women's identity, Patriarchy, Mythology, Gender, Tradition.

Submitted: 16.07.2026 Revised: 18.08.2026 Accepted: 23.08.2026 Published 02.10.2026

¹A. Deborah Joicy, PhD Scholar, Reg. No. 19121244012008, Assistant Professor of English, Rosemary College of Arts and Science, Munneerpallam, Tirunelveli - 627007, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli - 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr S. Vennila, Assistant Professor of English, Sarah Tucker College (Autonomous), Perumalpuram, Palayamkottai - 627007, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2026 A. Deborah Joicy & Dr S. Vennila. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, 'She does not have what it takes.' They will say, 'Women don't have what it takes'. - Clare Boothe Luce

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, is an important novel in modern *Indian* English fiction. While the novel is not directly feminist, it closely examines women's lives, their emotional struggles, and their search for self-realisation in a patriarchal society. By following women from different generations, Hariharan explores the conflict between personal dreams and the expectations of tradition, family, and society.

Hariharan is known for showing the complex lives of *Indian* women. Her stories question patriarchal values but do not completely reject cultural traditions. Instead, she writes about women who find ways to negotiate, resist, and reshape their roles in society. Her novels show the emotional, psychological, and social pressures women face, as well as their desire for dignity, independence, and selfhood. Society often values sacrifice, obedience, patience, and selflessness in women, while seeing independence, ambition, and self-expression as less acceptable. Hariharan challenges these views by creating female characters who look for identities beyond what society expects. "The relationship between social capital and gender equality has been studied predominantly at the micro-level with mixed but often negative results. Both mixed-gender social capital and women's social capital do not seem to benefit women as much as men" (Van Staveren and Mangraviti 1).

A key part of Hariharan's writing is her focus on women supporting each other. Rather than showing women as isolated or as rivals, she highlights the strong connections between women from different generations. These relationships offer emotional support and help women understand themselves and heal. However, her characters still recognise the limits set by a patriarchal society. Their resistance is often quiet, reflecting the real experiences of middle-class *Indian* women who try to balance their own wishes with what society expects.

Objectives and Aim

This article examines the main theme of *The Thousand Faces of Night*: self-realisation, or discovering and fulfilling one's true identity and potential. Hariharan explores this by focusing on the inner lives of her female characters, whose identities are shaped by family, marriage, tradition, and cultural expectations. She uses mythology, folklore, and real-life experiences to retell familiar stories from a woman's perspective and reveal the patriarchal ideas within them. "In recent decades, a focus on the politics of folklore has taken centre stage within the field. Approaching expressive culture as both an important vector and expression of identity politics, a notable number of studies have explored the relationship between folklore and the state" (Lowthorpe 542). This shows that many common

beliefs about womanhood are shaped by society, not by nature. Three women from different generations—Devi, Sita, and Mayamma—each respond to patriarchal authority in different ways. Through their linked stories, Hariharan shows the varied experiences of *Indian* women, while highlighting their common search for identity and emotional fulfilment.

Analysis and Discussion:

Devi, Sita, and Mayamma: Generational responses to patriarchy

Devi, the main character, is an educated young woman who returns to India after studying in the United States. Even though she has learned about freedom and individuality, she feels trapped by traditional expectations when she enters an arranged marriage with Mahesh. The marriage does not give her emotional support or personal satisfaction, and she feels increasingly isolated. Her later relationship with Gopal also fails because it does not respect her sense of self. Through these experiences, Devi realises that marriage or romantic relationships alone cannot define who she is. When she returns to her mother's home, it is not a sign of defeat but the start of a new journey toward understanding herself. "The feminist analysis of gendered power alone is not enough to grasp the depoliticising effects of the strategic governance reforms in relation to gender equality policy" (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 741).

Sita shows a different side of womanhood. She takes on the traditional roles of wife and daughter-in-law with grace and responsibility, but she quietly keeps her sense of self through inner and emotional strength. Instead of openly challenging male-dominated rules, she finds ways to make her own choices within family life. Her support for Devi at the end of the novel highlights the importance of female friendship and understanding.

Mayamma's story shows the pain faced by women who accept patriarchal traditions without question. She is married young and experiences hardship, loneliness, and emotional neglect throughout her life. Her quiet endurance represents many women whose lives are shaped by sacrifice and social expectations instead of personal choice. Through Mayamma, Hariharan reveals the real cost of unquestioned patriarchal authority. In the stories of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Hariharan gives a detailed view of women's struggle for identity in today's *Indian* society. The novel does not show freedom as simply rejecting tradition. Instead, it suggests that self-realisation comes from self-awareness, resilience, supportive relationships, and the courage to question old rules. *The Thousand Faces of Night* shows that a woman's identity should not be limited to being a daughter, wife, or mother, but should be shaped by her own choices and dreams.

Rewriting Myth; Reimagining Female Agency

Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* skillfully reinterprets *Indian* mythology to examine women's struggle for identity and self-realisation. Rather than using myths merely as cultural references, Hariharan transforms them into powerful accounts that challenge patriarchal assumptions and offer alternative

models of female agency. By drawing upon characters from the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and other traditional legends, she establishes a conversation between the past and the present, demonstrating that women's struggles for dignity, freedom, and selfhood transcend historical periods and cultural boundaries. Myth thus becomes a key literary strategy through which the novelist exposes the continuity of gender inequality while also envisioning possibilities for resistance. As Simone de Beauvoir famously observes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283). This insight is particularly relevant to Hariharan's novel, where womanhood is shown not as a fixed biological condition but as a social identity formed by tradition, family, and patriarchal expectations. Through mythological narratives, Hariharan questions these inherited definitions and reconstructs womanhood as a process of self-exploration and self-determination.

During her childhood, Devi grows up listening to narratives her grandmother narrates. These stories are not simply sleep-time stories; they become the foundation of her moral imagination and psychological development. Mythological figures such as Gandhari, Amba, Damayanti, Ganga, and the anonymous serpent bride accompany Devi throughout her life, influencing her understanding of courage, sacrifice, love, and justice. Their symbolic presence shows how myths continue to shape contemporary female consciousness.

Sigmund Freud has stressed the psychological significance of myths. In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, he observes that human knowledge is drawn from wide cultural sources: "Widely different sources, from fairy tales and myths, jokes and witticisms, from folklore. . . sayings and songs of different people and from poetic and colloquial usage of language" (166). Hariharan's narrative reflects this insight by presenting myths not as distant legends but as living forces that shape her protagonist's inner world.

Among these mythological figures, Damayanti represents freedom of choice and emotional autonomy. By choosing her own husband despite numerous obstacles, she symbolises a woman's right to determine her own destiny. Amba, on the other hand, embodies resistance against injustice. Humiliated and denied agency, she refuses to accept her fate and dedicates her life to seeking justice against Bhishma. Similarly, the tale of the girl who marries a serpent and ultimately transforms her husband into a human being symbolises hope, perseverance, and the chance of transformation through faith and endurance. These women are not passive sufferers; they become symbols of fortitude and determination that inspire Devi throughout her voyage.

Hariharan contrasts these empowering mythological figures with the realities of contemporary patriarchal society, where women are often expected to remain silent, obedient, and self-sacrificing. Against this social background, the novel presents women whose self-respect prevents them from accepting oppression unquestioningly. The stories of Mayamma, Parvati, Uma, and the legendary heroines gradually awaken Devi's consciousness and encourage her to question the

limitations imposed upon her.

Goddess imagery and Devi's psychological awakening

Amidst emotional crisis, Devi imagines the powerful female deities Durga and Kali as emblems of strength and resistance. She envisions herself transformed into a fearless warrior: "I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi; I rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons' heads" (41). This vision represents more than a fantasy of revenge. It symbolises Devi's psychological awakening and her growing determination to resist the invisible forces that suppress her sense of self. The goddess imagery enables her to reconceive herself not as a victim but as a proactive agent capable of confronting injustice. The symbolic transformation from an obedient daughter to a warrior reflects the beginning of her search for selfhood.

Mayamma's silent endurance, Parvati's calm strength, Uma's emotional pain, and Amba's fearless demand for justice all shape Devi's quest toward self-discovery. Though they belong to distinct worlds—some mythical and some real—their lives become important lessons for her. Each woman shows that resistance can take many forms, but it is key to achieving self-respect and personal freedom. Their experiences encourage Devi to question the traditional beliefs and expectations that control her own life.

Marriage, disillusionment, and the search for autonomy

At first, Devi tries to follow social norms by accepting an arranged marriage with Mahesh. She hopes marriage will bring happiness and stability, but instead she experiences loneliness and emotional emptiness. Mahesh cannot understand her emotional needs or appreciate her intellectual interests. As a result, marriage becomes a symbol of restriction rather than comfort. Remembering the courageous women she admired in her childhood narratives, Devi begins to imagine escaping from her confined life. She admits, "I write detailed scenarios in my mind for the last act humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with" (95). This imagined rebellion does not express a wish for violence; instead, it reflects her deep frustration with patriarchal expectations and her desire to regain her say, dignity, and individuality.

Seeking a new beginning, Devi leaves Mahesh and starts a relationship with Gopal, believing it will offer the freedom she could not find in marriage. However, this relationship also disappoints her because Gopal, like Mahesh, fails to recognize her as an independent individual with her own dreams and identity. Through this experience, Hariharan makes it clear that genuine liberation cannot be achieved simply by moving from one relationship to another. A woman's identity should not depend on a man's love, approval, or acceptance. Instead, it must grow from self-knowledge and inner confidence. Hariharan challenges this long history of silence by presenting women whose voices, emotions, and struggles have been ignored within a patriarchal society.

Returning to the mother: reconciliation and self-discovery

The most important transformation in Devi's life comes when she decides to leave Gopal and return to her mother. Unlike her earlier choices, driven by disappointment and a desire to escape, this decision is based on self-knowledge and emotional maturity. She realises that neither marriage nor romantic love can provide lasting happiness unless she first understands herself. Looking back on her life, she recognises that her search for happiness was driven by unrealistic expectations rather than genuine self-discovery. She reflects, "I was always greedy for good fortune. Foolish girl... But as I hung on to it with all my strength, it dragged me down into the muddy, violet swamp" (112). This realisation marks the completion of her emotional journey. By accepting herself instead of seeking fulfilment through others, Devi moves toward a life of independence, self-respect, and personal identity. Through her transformation, Hariharan suggests that genuine freedom does not begin with rebellion alone but with the courage to discover and define oneself.

This realisation marks the completion of Devi's psychological journey. She understands that pursuing externally defined joy often results in the loss of one's identity. "Jung believed that the unconscious bears a compensatory or counterbalancing relationship to an individual's conscious mind" (Kozlowski 125). Instead of continuing to escape from one relationship to another, she chooses introspection and inner exploration. Carl Gustav Jung's observation that "The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are" (11) appropriately summarises Devi's transformation. Her return to her mother does not signify defeat or surrender; rather, it symbolises reconciliation with herself and the beginning of an independent life guided by her conscience. Through Devi's journey, Hariharan shows that self-realisation is not achieved through rebellion alone but through self-awareness, experience, and the courage to define one's identity beyond patriarchal expectations.

Conclusion

The Thousand Faces of Night successfully combines mythology, psychology, and social realism to portray a woman's quest for self-realization. By re-envisioning traditional myths through a feminist perspective, Hariharan transforms legendary women into lasting symbols of courage and fortitude. The novel ultimately affirms that genuine liberation begins when women reject imposed identities and discover the strength to define themselves on their own terms. *The Thousand Faces of Night* provides a compelling exploration of women's struggle for identity and self-realization within the patriarchal structure of *Indian* society. Through the lives of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, Githa Hariharan demonstrates that women across eras experience emotional isolation, social restrictions, and personal conflicts. Although their circumstances differ, each woman confronts the limitations imposed by family, marriage, and cultural expectations. Their journeys reveal that self-realization is neither immediate nor easy; it emerges through suffering, introspection, resilience,

and the courage to question accepted norms.

Hariharan skillfully combines realism with mythology and folklore to examine the difficulties of women's lives. Mythological narratives aren't presented merely as cultural memories but as symbolic systems that inspire women to resist oppression and discover their inner strength. By reinterpreting traditional myths from a woman's perspective, the novelist challenges patriarchal notions of ideal womanhood and offers alternative possibilities for female identity and empowerment.

Among the three protagonists, Devi's transformation forms the novel's emotional and philosophical core. At the beginning, she is uncertain, dependent, and formed by others' expectations. Her arranged marriage with Mahesh and her later relationship with Gopal fail to provide the emotional fulfilment and personal acknowledgement she seeks. These experiences teach her that identity cannot be achieved through marriage or romantic relationships alone. Her decision to return to her mother is not an act of defeat or retreat; rather, it symbolises the beginning of an independent journey heading toward self-understanding and emotional maturity. Devi's movement from silence to self-expression, from dependence to autonomy, and from conformity to self-consciousness reflects her successful quest for self-realisation.

Sita and Mayamma represent two other dimensions of women's experiences. While Mayamma silently endures the hardships created by patriarchal traditions, Sita negotiates social expectations with dignity, resilience, and steady determination. Together, these women illustrate different strategies of survival, adaptation, and resistance. Hariharan neither glorifies suffering nor presents rebellion as the only path to liberation. Instead, she stresses that every woman's road toward selfhood is formed by her individual experiences, choices, and inner strength.

The novel ultimately argues that a woman's identity should not be confined to socially prescribed roles such as daughter, wife, or mother. True self-realisation begins when women recognise their individuality and claim the freedom to define themselves on their own terms. Hariharan's portrayal of female consciousness, mental depth, and emotional strength makes *The Thousand Faces of Night* a significant contribution to contemporary *Indian* English literature and feminist discourse.

Githa Hariharan successfully portrays the inner lives of women with remarkable sensitivity and insight. Through her nuanced characterization and innovative use of mythology, she exposes the inequalities embedded in patriarchal society while affirming the possibility of transformation and self-discovery. *The Thousand Faces of Night* remains a powerful narrative of women's search for identity, dignity, and freedom, showing that self-realization comes not from rejecting one's roots but from finding the courage to live according to one's own conscience and aspirations.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- Dhawan, R. K., editor. *Indian Women Novelists*. Vol. 2, Prestige Books, 1993.
- Elomäki, Anna, and Hanna Ylöstalo. "From Promoting Gender Equality to Managing Gender Equality Policy." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2021, pp. 741-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1880289>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Washington Square Press, 1968.
- Gupta, Balram. "Indian English Woman Short Story Writer: An Overview." *Vikram Journal of English Studies*, vol. 1, 1993, pp. 37-49.
- Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India (p) Ltd., 1992
- . *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Penguin Books India, 1992.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Translated by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes, Harcourt Brace, 1933.
- Kozlowski, Kelly A. "Healing through Mythology." *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2012, pp. 125-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2012.709713>.
- Lowthorp, Leah K. "Folklore, Politics, and the State: Kutiyattam Theatre and National/Global Heritage in India." *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2017, pp. 542-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2017.1371513>.
- Nityanandam, Indira. "A Search for Identity: Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*." *Indian Women Novelists*, edited by R. K. Dhawan, vol. 2, Prestige Books, 1995, pp. 87-96.
- Van Staveren, Irene, and Nicola Mangraviti. "Does Social Capital Improve Gender Equality?" *Review of Social Economy*, 5 Aug. 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00346764.2026.2703105>.