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## Invention of New Paradigms for Women's Identity in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Dr. Mamta Beniwal  
&  
Dr. Sangeeta Jhajharia  
Asst. Professor of English  
Department of Arts and Humanities,  
College of Arts Science and Humanities,  
Mody University, Lakshmangarh,  
Sikar, Rajasthan, India.

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### **Abstract:**

The predicament of the new woman has become an important concern for Githa Hariharan. The new woman is not the contemporary woman or even the modern woman. The concept of modernity keeps changing from time to time and from one social milieu to another. Githa Hariharan presents today's intellectual woman who confronts loneliness and alienation. Modern woman makes all possible adjustments but does not compromise on her basic personality. This problem of adjustment is highlighted by Githa Hariharan's novel. She widens her field of vision to include the periods of Mahabharata and Ramayana so that the plane of her experience of woman's dilemma acquires a universality that goes beyond the time barrier and culture boundaries to lend a kind of timeless validity to the issues heightened in her fiction. Balram Gupta brings out in an article how Githa Hariharan's novel draws upon feminine counter pull to dominant patriarchy. He comments: "Thousand faces symbolize the multiple existence of Indian woman which has limitless potential to suffer and sustain life through her struggle and self-realization." (1)

This novel celebrates the female bond and attempts to create new paradigms for the making of woman's identity. The mother-daughter- relationship has been delineated in this novel. In the patriarchal set-up, mother-daughter-relationship is deformed and motherhood has a limited meaning. It possesses neither economic nor social status and at the same time, has a minimum role in the travails of the daughter coming to terms with her sexuality. The restoration of a mother-daughter bond even after the daughter moves out into the world is important, because it displays persistent effort against sexism.

**Key Words:** *Mother-daughter bond, Alienation, Female counter pull, Womanhood.*

Daughters are conventionally brought up to believe that their parents home is a temporary abode and that it is husband's house which has to be eventually considered as home. Once married, they are treated as visitors when they come to meet the parents. But 'returning' married daughters cause shame to the family's reputation and are a source of despair to their mothers. Devi's return to her mother in the novel is welcomed by her mother who was waiting for her to come. This novel is the story of Devi's quest for a self image. Having failed to define her identity within the framework of the male-oriented social structures as a wife in an arranged marriage, or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns

to her mother, to stay and fight and to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning. It is in relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself. The text weaves together multiple narratives of Devi, of her mother Sita, her grandmother and of Mayamma. The main story of her life is written by Devi herself and a number of stories are incorporated. Devi is primarily a listener, listening to the other storytellers- her grandmother in the village or Mayamma in her husband's house.

There are three mentors in Devi's life – her grandmother, her mother and her housekeeper. At the initial stage she comes under the influence of her grandmother who narrates to her the tales of mythical heroines making connections between the awe-inspiring lives of mythological women and sordid stories of real women around her. It is through the inspired tutelage of her grandmother that Devi's artistic vision is first unleashed and creative yearnings are nurtured. Grandmother is her first teacher who imparts knowledge through purposeful tales of the forgotten women of the past-Damyanti, Gandhari, Amba and Ganga. All these women contain great fury in them and have staged their protest against exploitation in their own powerful ways. Gandhari's anger is hidden behind the thick bandage she tied over her own eyes opting to share the darkness of her blind husband's world. Amba is a female avenger, who transformed the fate that overtook her into a triumph and avenged herself against her offender Bhishma. Ganga, who drowned her children and walked out of marriage when the terms of marriage were broken, represents female determination. Damayanti's *swayambara* is the ultimate celebration of the autonomy of woman as Damyanti, the princess, chooses to marry the man she loves even against divine interference.

Her grandmother does not dwell on the more prominent figures in Hindu myths- Sita, Savitri or Anushuya who are called epitomes of female virtue. Her tales are stories of deeds of heroic proportions and they impart a vision to the growing child. Devi is fed on these stories of her mythical ancient women and grows into a dreamer inhabiting an extra physical realm. She enjoys intimacy with them in imagination. She wants to redeem her sex. She feels she is Devi on a tiger.

Sita- Devi's mother- matches the ideal description of womanhood. She is an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She led her husband from promotion to promotion. After she gave up her music as the care of daughter was her main concern. Devi became her new veena. She sent her to America for studies. When Devi returns, Sita arranges Devi's marriage with Mahesh. Sita is, in a way, reborn later in her life as she discovers herself in being an individual and offering support to her daughter. She realizes that a woman is not primarily a wife or a mother but an individual with her own self. When Devi returns to her mother she finds sustenance and a ground for her own survival.

Another story teller in the novel is Mayamma who tells tales of real life. She has suffered a lot through gender discrimination. She was ill-treated first by her husband, then by her spoilt son. She finds refuge in a relative's house. She is weak and cannot change the course of history. So she accepts her role and is resigned to it. She feels that the suffering of woman is because her being a woman preordains it. She learns strategies of survival. This is what every woman has to learn. Survival is the highest ideal in the struggle ridden life of woman in the absence of the strength to strike against her cage.

Devi thinks that she can relate neither to the progressive model, nor to the benevolent model of femininity offered to women. She would be neither a westernized seeker of

gratifications nor a gentle partner in home-making. She leaves her husband and goes to Gopal. She wants to transform herself to a new goddess. She creates a different destiny for herself. She rejects the idea of the woman being a reflection of the male. She chooses the female-female bond. She has discovered through suffering that shared experience is rejuvenating. Her present will build her future. It is her final assertion of autonomy that becomes the celebration of her own power. Women are now not vague figures serving other's ends. They are questers who seek their own salvation.

The novel can be called yet another version of the female novel of a marriage in which woman does not live happily ever after. On getting married she grows resentful of the restrictions of the domestic enclosure and asserts her freedom by walking out of the prison of marriage. Devi finds her marriage a solitary confinement. She suffers from a growing sense of futility. She then seeks escape in the company of a traveling musician but in the end returns to the arms of her mother. She is neither dejected nor defeated. She is sure of her survival. She would fight. Thus the novel presents the story of woman's quest for identity outside marriage. It is story of collective struggle of women for self liberation.

When she was in America, she wondered at the easy relationships her friends had with their mothers. They chatted with them about their boyfriends, they hugged, and they kissed. But Sita and Devi neither hugged nor kissed nor talked about love. They were intensely conscious of each other. They felt a tender protectiveness towards each other. Sita became her anchor rock- never wrong, never to be questioned, a self-evident fact of her existence. Devi agreed to a negotiated marriage like a good Indian girl thus belying the apprehensions that a daughter sent to America would never come back, that she would marry an American boy, that she would forget her parents. Devi proved different, as pliant as home-grown daughters. Marriage confirmed for her what Mayamma had said- that the *key to marriage is the ability to endure*. The idea of these words is the summary as well as summation of a woman's life in the traditionally held view, her only constant being survival.

However, in the novel Githa Hariharan constructs a narrative of feminism in which women fight their wars against the patriarchal tradition and ideas generated by a rigid social system. In her marriage Devi's overwhelming feeling is the regard to her husband is: "I am a wooden puppet in his hands." There is a fear of inadequacy. As she has said: "She finds that her student years in America have not prepared her for a future in India. She is a dutiful Indian girl who is the liability of her widowed mother." (2)

Devi could not emulate her mother since she had to make her path herself. She acquired a different kind of vision to perceive life around her. In her early dreams she would find herself a woman warrior, a heroine that rode a tiger and cut off the evil, magical demon's head. But she has to obey her mother who selects Mahesh for her. Mahesh is a regional manager in a company. Being a manger Mahesh believes in managing everything in his life as he does for his company. For him marriage is just a necessary milestone in life. In the novel Mahesh comes out shorn of a round personality. He is so well fitted in his managerial role that even at home he allows his single-minded perception to take control of his duties as husband. This throws their marriage out of gear. There is at the same time an incomprehension fostered by his male 'man of the world' notion and an absence of communication making him indifferent to her urges and desire. Mahesh's main concern is

with the fact that his goods be delivered to his consumers. For him, his wife Devi is no better than a clumsy novice who needs to firm herself up a great deal to come up to his standards.

Mahesh is a poor manager of emotions. He is a votary of the cult of efficiency and believes that emotions and intimacy give birth to vulnerability. He wants positive results. There must always be material gains. He does understand ways of nature and human relations. When his wife asks him, "Why did you marry me?" his reply is very revealing, "Whatever people get married for", Mahesh said. He peered into the mirror and readjusted the knot of his tie," Thank God we Indians are not obsessed with love." (3) So Devi's existence with Mahesh becomes a dungeon with no breathing space. Mahesh does not provide her the sustenance for her emotional being. Devi wants to take up a job outside the house but her husband does not permit it. When she wants to read books as a pastime, Mahesh exclaims: "did your mother need books to tell her how to be a wife?" (4) Mahesh obviously thinks that Devi, his wife, is lacking in something to be a wife of his liking.

Mahesh likes her mother's efficiency, being a devotee of efficiency himself. He tells her, "I have never met a woman more efficient than your mother." (5) There is implicit in this praise dissatisfaction with Devi as wife. There is also not much effort on his part to understand what his wife would want. When Devi wants to be coached in the card game, he dismisses it outright: "Don't be silly, all the others who play are men." (6) He lacks the eyes that could peep into the heart of a woman. Devi's routine puzzles him. "What have you been doing while I was away? Mahesh asked. 'Oh, why,' I said 'Nothing? How do you do nothing?' he laughed." (7) He expects from his life energy and enthusiasm. He says that their grandmothers were not educated but they were better housewives. He is looking for better housekeeping and a positive image. He would certainly approve if Devi had the competence observable only in cooking, cleaning, arranging, receiving guests and entertaining. She would get good points if she could chop, boil and stir, entertain and make an overall good impression upon wives of his colleagues. Desperately Devi tries to comply with his wishes. She recalls: "I cooked all afternoon as if my life depended on it. Chop, boil, and stir. Like silver eyelids, the onion-skin slid on to the board, one by one. The heat and smoke in the dingy old kitchen turned my entire body into a map of little streams. I felt my resentment, my aches and pains, trickle away, leaving me quiet, still, resigned. (8)

She is engulfed by awesome loneliness and a sense of uselessness. Her husband wants to have a baby. When she fails to get him his child she has to undergo the humiliation at the doctor's clinic. Her wishes in the matter are of no account. The crass matter-of-factness at the doctor's clinic, their casual and blatant handling of her body shocks and humiliates her: "I stood dumb, overwhelmed by his official reference to my sex life. I seem to have lost, my sense of humor, even my girlish ability to giggle." (9) Geeta Hariharan shows patriarchy as a system that sustains male control over women's productive and reproductive capacities. It uses customs as a means whereby men exercise control over women's sexuality. It is this that makes both an illiterate woman like Mayamma and an America-returned woman like Devi its victims. Their lives can easily become stories of suppression and deprivation. In the epic *Mahabharat*, a woman like Gandhari must embrace her destiny with self-sacrifice. From her Grandmother Devi has learnt, "A woman meets her fate alone," "All husbands are noble" and "A wife's success depends on her ability to endure and go on." (10)

These are bits of wisdom that had taught women in their times to deal with the pressure of patriarchy.

Devi, after her marriage finds all husbands demand a woman who does not complain, a woman who can make sacrifices without fuss. Devi is not willing to abide by this expectation. She chooses her own fate. For long Devi remains in a state of uncertainty, a state of suspended existence. While her grandmother's stories were assertion of feminine fulfillment, Baba's stories were of conventions determined by male-made codes. This code sets the limits for a housewife. Baba told her of the boons that follow the wife's devotion to her husband and the house. This is the kind of wisdom that has gone on accumulating over centuries that which tends to provide legitimacy to the subjugation of woman by men. This system finds a symmetrical parallel in the system of caste-exploitation in which the place and role of castes were ordained and legitimized. Both those who were unfortunately placed low in the caste hierarchy, and women suffered because of the pronouncements made centuries ago and what was deemed right or wrong long ago in the past.

One way of looking at the Indian literature of pre- Independence years or the years following the Independence is to seek in them saga of pain and struggle. Engulfed by poverty and ignorance, bound by rigid tradition and customs, subject to horrendous caste and gender discrimination, nothing but struggle, pain and inevitable defeat could be expected from a narrative of this period. Though Geeta Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* has the struggle of women as its theme yet it cannot be characterized as a tale of mere oppression and defeat. It is possible to look at the novel more favorably as a story of release, assertion and freedom.

In the novel, as we have seen, Devi finds the gynecologist's probing offensive. She has gone to her, much against her will, to be able to beget a baby for her husband Mahesh. She has not been keen on becoming a mother, though it was not always so. In the early days of her marriage Devi saw herself as having "a brood of children," though only for a passing moment. In her garden, on a swing, she thinks: "Perhaps I will raise a brood of joyous, wild children, who will run pell-mell in this quiet garden, leaving behind everywhere a noisy trail of chaos where their grubby hands and feet have been. Or perhaps, they will, like Mahesh, be serious and sensible, well scrubbed, hair-oiled, miniature adults. They will indulge my fantasies of childhood, but will know better". (11) In the days soon after her marriage she had thoughts of becoming a good wife and a good housekeeper like her mother. At one point, at the beginning of her wedded life, she thinks, "Slowly, slowly, I must make her (Mayamma) make her believe that I am not interested in playing mistress. She has the house, I have, and well I have Mahesh."(12). At this stage in her marriage she wants nothing more than being Mahesh's wife and if Mayamma keeps jealous guard over running the household she would not complain. However, we find she is soon disenchanted with whatever view of marriage she had had in her mind. She comes to see that she would not be able to go along with Mahesh's worldliness, or what he takes immense pride in- his managerial efficiency. While Devi would seek some assurance of respect and love from him, he is not for ready to express of his feelings. "All this spewing out of feelings is self-indulgent, he says. It is un-Indian."(13)

Devi, as she comes in contact with her father-in-law in her house, begins to feel a great deal of respect and affection for him. She calls him Baba. Of course, her husband does

not share her attitude. He thinks that his father is only full of ideas and books. "What will you do with all his highbrow knowledge?" He tells his wife." (14) The views ascribed to Baba, and his life as briefly seen in the novel, offer an interesting light on the issue of caste in South Indian Hindu society. Baba presents before Devi an ideal of family and wife's role in the family. His views are the product of his position as a Brahmin and a scholar. "Devi," Baba said, 'Wherever you are, remember you are a Brahmin. You may not know it, but underneath that skin flows a fine-veined river of pure blood, the legacy of centuries of learning.'(15) So it is a Brahmanism that is based on purity and learning. His description of a Brahmin, though derived from Manu, is imbued with his asceticism: "A Brahmin, he said, the words of Manu giving his voice a new authority, shrinks from honours as from poison, humility he covets as if it is nectar. The humble one sleeps happily, wakes up happily and moves about in the world happily..." (16) Baba also narrates to her stories from Indian scriptures. Listening to his stories Devi is reminded of her grandmother's stories which, as she asserts, were "a prelude to my womanhood."(17) Baba's ideal of womanhood is anything but easy. Women are worthy of high regard. He tells Devi, "All men are enjoined to cherish women and look after them as their most precious wards", and "Women have always been the instruments of saint's initiation into *bhakti*." (18) Citing the instance of Saint Purandar Dasa, he says, "You see, it takes the wife's flame of dharma to light within a man the divine lamp that is rusting and neglected." (19) In the same way he says, "Great men earn through their spiritual power the fortune of a virtuous wife." (20) It is ironic that Parvatiamma, Devi's mother-in-law, and Baba's wife, who it is suggested was sensitive, devout and noble, leaves her household, and husband and her son Mahesh, and moves out to Kashi in a quest of her own. Devi remembers Baba after his death and thinks, "All that abstract nobility hoisted on a pedestal, yet your wife ran away to seek salvation elsewhere."(21) Devi misses Baba's presence near her keenly, and feels betrayed by his going away: "They have let me down cruelly, these friends I worshipped with the steady eyes, the wide open ears, and the eager, half-empty mind of my childhood."(22)

Devi after grieving for Baba tries to move ahead. She decides to leave the impossible nobility of Baba and the dreamy-eyed love of her father Anna, and adopt the practical and decisive attitude of her mother. Increasingly, it is becoming painful for her to stay together with Mahesh, her husband: "I find that lying alone, late at night in a house not my own, to shut the door and windows is not enough. The howling wind does not know what it is to be shut out. It seeps in through every crack in the floor, the roof, the wall (23). The howling storm outside is symbolic of her own raging confusion. She knows now that she has to leave Mahesh's house. "Is there no other way?"(24) She asks herself. She suffers bitterly as she finds staying with her uncomprehending husband impossible. Mayamma echoes her feelings when she says "Only the goddess knows what knives of pain twist and turn in a woman's heart." (25) In the end she leaves and goes away with Gopal, whose music, as she says, "reduces me to helplessness." Gopal can create through his music a transcendence that lifts the listener to a sublimity of joy, an altogether different level of experience. A true master, he possesses lyrical power in his rendering of the ragas.

However, Gopal the creator of sublime music is also a man- a rum drinking, pan-chewing, middle- aged man with an eye for feminine figure. Devi's stay with Gopal is a complex many-faceted expression of her wishes not just an immature giving in to passions.

Devi soon discovers that she cannot just be an appendage to Gopal's circle of admirers, disciples and sundry other persons who were his hangers on. She leaves him and heads for her mother's house on the sea-side in Madrass. It is her well considered decision: "Devi knew the time was right, if she did not act now she would be forever condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidity of the mainland."(26)So it is for her own stability, for a ground under her feet, and a firm position to stand on that she decides to move out of her association with Gopal and strike out a new path for herself. Leaving Gopal behind was again a major decision for her like her decision to leave Mahesh. There is, though, the difference in regard to maturity and understanding. "She felt bold and carefree when she left "Mahesh's house, a little like a heroine. But she felt like a fugitive now, though she was, for the first time, no longer on the run."(27)

She was no longer on the run because she had found certitude and taken control of herself. Earlier, while leaving Mahesh, her passage was negotiated for her by the myths that had filled her childhood- by the stories that she had absorbed from her grandmother and the fantasies that filled her imagination then. She had created for herself the figure of Devi, the Goddess who fought and vanquished the demon. The story of Ganga, wife of legendary king Shantanu, who threw all her children except the last one, into the river, and the story of Amba who did penance and sought revenge for her hurt pride were also constituents of her decision. It can thus be seen that Devi's rebellion is not inspired by any influence of modernity, her modern education or her stay abroad in America. Her stay in America and her experience there do not appear to count for much in her life. Leaving America "She felt her American years slip away from her shoulders... The brief dream was over. She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet half-way, naked and vulnerable, her homecoming."(28)The tales were never driven out of her system. The dreams and fantasies fed by the tales of strong willed heroines of the past were there to haunt her thoughts at Mahesh's house when she contemplated an escape from there. There is a very revealing passage in the novel that takes us right into the midst of her churning thoughts: "I sat day after day in the airless room, the brass and stone pantheon surrounding me. In rhythm with the rain they chanted the secrets of Gods as they danced round and round in frenzy.

Like Sati you must burn yourself to death, like Sati you must vindicate your husband's honour and manhood. Like Parvati you must stand neck deep in cold turbulent waters...

Like Hemavati you must turn that black skin on your sinful body into a golden sheen of light and beauty. Like Gauri you must reap the bountiful harvest....They danced, their frenzy increasing to a manic pitch, into my dreams night after night. But now Mayamma, Annapurna, my unseen mother-in-law Parvatamma, the maidservant Gauri, my cousin Uma, the man turning Amba, and even the barely recognizable, bent frame of my grandmother whizzed past as they whirled around charity."(29)

This passage laying bare her commotion ends significantly with the image of the Goddess Kali, the fierce Goddess who "thirsts for war, for heroic feats in the battle."The novel essentially is about the difficult choices faced by the several women who appear in it, though most prominent among them are Devi, her mother Sita and the caretaker of her husband, Mahesh's house- Mayamma. But before them there is an array of several other women whose lives crowd Devi's mind in her infancy. All of them are women thwarted, but

none of them accepts defeat. Recalling her cousin Uma's marriage Devi remembers how the house was scrubbed clean for Uma's marriage and there was much rejoicing. But Uma's marriage soon turned sour. Both her husband and his father drank "till she was stupefied with fear." When her drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips she could not stay there. A bad marriage became an impossible one. When Devi questions her grandmother about Uma's fate, grandmother could not say much by way of consolation: 'Ah, Devi,' she said, 'why weep over Uma? A high-born prince or even a goddess, has been the victim of disaster, but a woman like Amba, a truly courageous woman, finds the means to transform her hatred, the fate that overtakes her, into a triumph.'(30) Similarly Gauri the maidservant returns to her father's village since she had the misfortune to fall in love with the wrong man in her husband's house. Annapurna another woman in the novel is quickly banished by Devi's mother from her house when she notices Annapurna's exuberance in her husband's presence. Devi after her marriage learns from Mayamma, the housekeeper about her mother-in-law. Devi's mother-in-law Parvatiamma left the household and went away on her own. She was a noble, woman with great gentleness. She turned to religion with devotion to her God. Her father-in-law, whom Devi calls Baba, and feels much affection for, is also a figure of nobleness, Still Parvatamma left him and went away. We can sense some kind of failure here. Mayamma calls him 'stupid man who could not stop her from going away.' Was it a failure of Brahmmical high ideals of marriage or a failure of the practitioners themselves? The novel is silent there. Nonetheless purely other worldly notion of a worldly institution like marriage must surely founder against the rock of reality.

Mayamma's own story is very revealing and significant in the structure of the novel. Having been married at a young age she became subject to much brutality from her husband who was a boor and a drunken rake. He kicked her and beat her for imaginary offences. Mayamma is a victim of not only her husband's violence but has to undergo much praying and sacrificial fasting by way of penance as she waited for a son for ten years. About her mother-in-law Mayamma remembers "She tore my new saris and gave me yesterday's rice to eat. What is the use of feeding a barren woman?" (31) After her long years of prayers, penance, fasting and all weird rituals she had to undergo, finally she gets a son, who when he grows up turns out to as violent as his father. In early adolescence he began to threaten Mayamma and "sold his last pair of gold bangles. When her son was eight years old her husband "disappeared taking all the money in the house." When her mother-in-law died still cursing her, she was left alone to bear whatever pain her son brought to her. A few years later he forcibly snatched away her earnings, hitting her with a frying pan and leaving her in pool of blood. He took away all Mayamma's soft feelings of motherhood, and when he died there was nothing left for Mayamma but to weep for her loss- how everything her youth, her happiness, husband, son had been snatched away from her. Still it will be mistake to see Mayamma only as a victim. She has suffered much, lost much. She has gained her knowledge through her suffering. She can see why Parvatiamma needed to go and why Devi had to leave. When Parvatiamma's son Mahesh told Mayamma that his mother was a "traitor", she felt how wrong Mahesh was. She is the one who understand Devi's urge to go away and to move away.

The other two women, mother and daughter, Sita and Devi are in no sense cast in the traditional frame of victimhood. Both are capable of deciding their steps when they need to

move ahead rather than cower and suffer as the feminist discourse in colonial and post-colonial India envisages. Sita, the mother, is determined and decisive. Devi is given to cultivating an inner world of her own and battle with her uncertainty. But when the time arrives, she with courage steps onward and does what she decides as her right as a woman she needs to do. Sita fully justifies her son-in-law Mahesh's calling her a good manager. When her husband was alive she coaxed him, even forced him to act in the way that brought him promotions in his work. Step after step he moved up in the hierarchy of his office till at last he got to do a stint in South Africa. However, in the act of prompting her husband she drove him too hard. In her view emotions, feelings counted for nothing. She considered her husband a dreamer and "intellectual". She had contempt for his "love for literature". In the end even though she got promotions for her husband, she drove away happiness from his life. Devi thinks of her father as "nailed...to the peacock throne in the empty, joyless mansion, an impotent figurehead". (32) Incidentally, the one who nailed him to the "peacock throne" is none other than his wife, as Devi sees it, thinking of her father when he is no more.

After her husband's death Sita does not give in to weakness, guilt or grief. She is masterful after her return to India; she holds off the relatives, keeps the house by the sea-side spotless and shiny, finds a husband for her daughter and remains in control all the time. Devi's running away from Mahesh is a great setback for her, entailing loss of prestige and wreckage of her hopes for her daughter. It makes her furious with rage and disappointment. She knows Devi will come back to her someday. Resolutely she waits for her. Gandhari in Mahabharat decides to go about always blindfold and give up the use of her eyes because she learns her husband had no sight to see. Her blindfold is her revenge. Sita who was an accomplished player of veena, snaps her veena strings when her father-in-laws is troubled by it. Her rage turns inwards; she did not touch her veena for years. It is only in her beach house that veena is taken up again, when she is trying to be herself truly.

Devi's own story is that of learning through experience. Out of her experience there arises clarity which makes her interpret her present and decide her course. In a patriarchal set up Devi has to overcome her weaknesses and create an image of the woman, an image in which she can see herself. We can see that what she learns from the myths of the past and the tales of the present goes into the making of such an image. Putting aside all disabilities of gender discrimination Geeta Hariharan's protagonist reveals one aspect of the Indian woman today- her capacity to bear pain and acquire from it the strength to assert herself.

Outside the world of fiction, in contemporary India feminist beliefs have gained tolerance if not ready acceptance. Sudhir Kakar, the well known social psychologist finds a recently published article in a newspaper that feminist assertion is a social fact today. Kakar writes: "When asked to specify the most important change in middle-class Indian society in the last four decades, my answer has been, 'The changing Indian woman!' More concretely, it is the middle class Indian woman who I consider the driving force behind changes taking place in many areas of social life." (33)

Kakar notices that a significant change can be seen in the realm of husband-wife relation in a marriage. He writes: "One consequence of these developments has been the woman's higher self-esteem and potential for self-assertion in which, in turn, have led her to demand greater emotional fulfillment in marriage than was the case with women of an earlier era. In other words women today feel more vocal in their demand for a universal promise of

marriage: intimacy, a couple's mutual enhancement of experience beyond procreative obligations and social duties, a stage of being that integrates tenderness and eroticism, human death and common values"(34). Geeta Hariharan's novel is a work of art, fiction crafted with skill and sensibility. If it also carries within it signals from the world outside this only indicates the ability of the artist to be a prophet as well as a lantern-bearer.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* challenges essentially, generalizing definitions of motherhood by reconceptualizing the definition of mother-daughter bond. In contrast to subordination and acceptance as the only response to the woman's condition in a patriarchal set-up, Geeta Hariharan seeks other solutions that propose rejuvenation and joy in a set of different circumstances that subvert existing social patterns and values. She is able to achieve this, and realize her womanhood as being different from her motherhood. In *Thousand Faces* it is the stifling presence of the mother bound in a patriarchal set-up that makes the protagonist Devi, question herself. In the end she breaks the dictates of patriarchal systems and seeks to empower herself by giving a new meaning to the mother-daughter relationship.

#### **END NOTES AND REFERENCES**

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