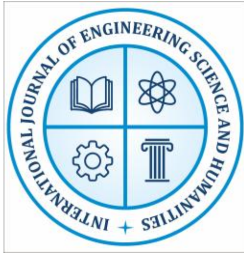

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A Mythical Reading of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

This paper examines Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night through a mythical and feminist lens, exploring how the novel reinterprets Indian myths, epics, and folklore to critique patriarchal ideology and redefine women's identity. Rather than employing myths merely as cultural embellishments, Hariharan reworks the stories of Amba, Gandhari, Damayanti, Ganga, and other mythological women as symbolic and interpretative frameworks through which the experiences of contemporary women such as Devi, Sita, and Mayamma are illuminated. The paper argues that the novel's non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented realities of women's lives, where memory, trauma, silence, and inherited traditions continually shape identity and subjectivity. By juxtaposing mythical narratives with contemporary experiences of marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and resistance, Hariharan demonstrates the persistence of patriarchal oppression across generations while simultaneously reclaiming myth as a powerful site of female agency, self-discovery, and resistance. Furthermore, the novel transforms storytelling into an emancipatory act that enables women to question patriarchal structures, reinterpret inherited cultural narratives, and recover voices that have long been suppressed. Ultimately, The Thousand Faces of Night presents myth not as a static repository of tradition but as a dynamic and transformative discourse through which women negotiate identity, challenge gendered power structures, and imagine alternative possibilities of existence.

Keywords: Myth, Feminism, Patriarchy, Female Identity, Mythological Reinterpretation

Introduction

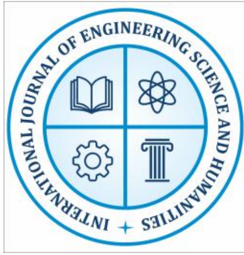
Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night is a seminal work of Indian English fiction that interrogates the deeply embedded structures of patriarchy through a creative reworking of Indian myths, epics, and folklore. Rather than employing these narratives merely as cultural embellishments, Hariharan transforms them into critical interpretative frameworks that expose the historical and continuing subjugation of women. The myths of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, and various folk traditions are reimagined to reveal how women have been silenced, idealised, objectified, and marginalised across generations. By placing mythical women alongside contemporary female characters, the novel establishes a dialogue between the past and the present, demonstrating that patriarchal structures continue to shape women's lives despite changing social circumstances.

The novel departs from the conventional linear mode of narration to reflect the complexities of women's lived experiences. Traditional patriarchal narratives, whether found in epics, historical accounts, or realist fiction, frequently portray men's lives as a linear progression marked by birth, education, achievement, authority, and legacy. Women's lives, however, are often characterised by cyclical patterns of domestic responsibility, silence, emotional suppression, memory, sacrifice, and repeated negotiations with patriarchal expectations. Recognising this distinction, Hariharan constructs a fragmented and non-linear narrative that more faithfully represents the temporal reality of women's experiences. The movement between past and present, myth and memory, personal experience and inherited tradition reflects the manner in which women's identities are continually shaped by cultural narratives transmitted across generations.

The narrative moves fluidly between Devi's present life, her childhood memories, her grandmother's storytelling, and Mayamma's recollections, while simultaneously weaving together the myths of Amba, Gandhari, Damayanti, Ganga, Draupadi, Shakuntala, and other legendary women. These mythical narratives do not exist as isolated episodes belonging to a distant past; instead, they become inseparable from the experiences of contemporary women, illuminating the continuity of gendered oppression as well as the enduring possibilities of resistance. Hariharan thus collapses the boundaries between myth and reality, suggesting that women's present circumstances cannot be understood without acknowledging the cultural narratives that continue to define femininity, duty, sacrifice, and obedience.

Another remarkable feature of the novel is its multiplicity of voices. Devi's search for identity unfolds alongside her grandmother's mythical narratives, Sita's quiet endurance, Mayamma's painful memories, and Gopal's artistic world, creating a richly layered narrative structure. Each voice contributes a distinct perspective on womanhood, demonstrating that there is no singular female experience. The title itself, The Thousand Faces of Night, symbolises this plurality of women's identities and histories. Every story represents another face of womanhood, revealing different experiences of suffering, resilience, compromise, and self-discovery. Like the oral traditions from which many of these myths originate, the narrative resists definitive beginnings and endings, instead unfolding through continuous acts of remembrance and retelling.

The novel's narrative form also reflects the workings of human memory, which rarely follows chronological order. Memory emerges through fragments, emotional associations, and recurring images rather than through a coherent sequence of events. Devi's journey of self-discovery unfolds through recollections, desires, disappointments, and moments of recognition that gradually reshape her understanding of herself and the women who came before her. By allowing the narrative structure to mirror the rhythms of memory itself, Hariharan presents identity not as a fixed or stable condition but as an evolving process shaped by personal experience, inherited stories, and cultural memory. Consequently, The Thousand Faces of Night



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demonstrates that storytelling itself becomes an act of recovery and resistance, enabling women to reinterpret inherited myths and reclaim identities long obscured by patriarchal discourse.

Argument

Devi: The Subaltern Protagonist

Devi, the protagonist of the novel, is sent by her parents to pursue higher education in the United States. After completing her studies abroad, she returns to her mother's home in South India following the death of her father, who had been working in Africa. On her return, she experiences a profound sense of estrangement, caught between the values of her Western education and the traditional domestic world represented by her mother, Sita. At this stage, the grandmother emerges as a significant influence in Devi's life. Throughout her childhood, she had nurtured Devi's imagination through stories drawn from Indian mythology and folklore, narrating the lives of women such as Amba, Draupadi, Sita, Gandhari, and Shakuntala.

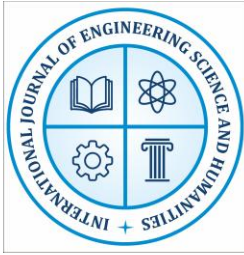
These mythological narratives play a crucial role in shaping Devi's consciousness. Rather than functioning merely as bedtime stories, they become an alternative mode of education through which the grandmother prepares her granddaughter to recognise the injustices embedded within patriarchal society. Hariharan thus presents mythology not simply as inherited tradition but as a repository of women's experiences, suffering, resilience, and resistance.

Among these narratives, the story of Amba occupies particular significance. The grandmother recounts how a swayamvara was arranged for the three princesses of Kashi—Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. Amba had already chosen King Salva as her husband and was about to garland him when Bhishma intervened, defeated the assembled kings, and carried the three princesses away for the marriage of his step-brother. When Amba informed Bhishma that she had already accepted Salva as her husband, he permitted her to return to him. However, Salva refused to accept her, declaring:

> "Do you think I feast on leftovers? I am a king. I do not touch what another man won in battle. Go to Bhishma. He won you when his arrow struck my eager hands on your luckless garland. He is your husband. What have you to do with me?" (Hariharan 20).

Rejected by Salva, Amba returned to Bhishma and pleaded with him to marry her. Bhishma, bound by his vow of lifelong celibacy, also refused. Abandoned by both men and deprived of any agency over her own life, Amba transformed her humiliation into a fierce determination for revenge. Through severe penance she obtained a boon from Lord Shiva that ultimately enabled her, after rebirth as Shikhandi, to become the instrument of Bhishma's death in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Hariharan establishes a clear parallel between Amba's predicament and Devi's own life. Like Amba, Devi finds herself trapped within choices that are ultimately denied to her. Although educated abroad and exposed to a different social environment, she is expected to submit



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unquestioningly to an arranged marriage with Mahesh, a man with whom she shares little emotional intimacy, despite her earlier relationship with Dan during her stay in the United States. Just as Amba's personal choice is nullified by patriarchal authority, Devi's aspirations are subordinated to familial expectations.

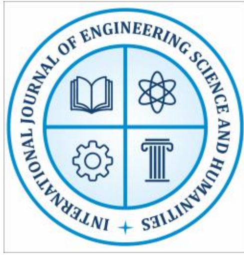
The parallels become even more striking as Devi experiences successive forms of emotional rejection. Amba is rejected first by Salva and then by Bhishma; similarly, Devi encounters neglect within her marriage to Mahesh, whose excessive professional commitments leave little room for emotional companionship. Seeking fulfilment elsewhere, she enters a relationship with Gopal, only to realise that he too values her primarily as an object of desire rather than as an individual with her own identity and aspirations. Through these parallel narratives, Hariharan demonstrates that although the historical circumstances of women may change, the structures of patriarchal domination continue to reproduce similar patterns of exclusion and objectification.

Unlike many mythological heroines who remain confined within the ideals of sacrifice and submission, Amba transforms her suffering into resistance. By recalling Amba's story, the grandmother offers Devi an alternative model of womanhood in which resistance becomes both possible and necessary. Nevertheless, Hariharan also revises the myth in an important way. Whereas Amba seeks justice through vengeance and rebirth, Devi's resistance takes the form of self-realisation and the rejection of oppressive relationships. Her decision to leave Mahesh signifies not merely the breakdown of a marriage but the beginning of her search for an autonomous identity.

Amba's narrative further exposes the patriarchal control exercised over women's bodies and social honour. She is abducted as property, rejected because her "purity" is questioned, and finally abandoned by the very men who determine her fate. Devi's experiences similarly reveal how patriarchal structures seek to regulate women's bodies, emotions, and identities. Mahesh expects unquestioning domestic obedience, while Gopal's attraction ultimately remains confined to physical desire. Hariharan reinforces this critique through the story of Uma, Devi's cousin, whose married life exposes another dimension of patriarchal violence:

> "Her husband and his father drank till she was stupefied with fear; even her girlhood, spent with an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother, had not prepared her for this trial. Her foreboding grew into terror when her drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips" (Hariharan 34).

By juxtaposing Amba's myth with Uma's lived experience, Hariharan demonstrates that the violence suffered by women is neither exceptional nor confined to mythology. Instead, myth and reality converge to reveal the historical continuity of patriarchal oppression. At the same time, the novel reclaims myth as a space through which women may reinterpret inherited narratives, question established social structures, and imagine new possibilities of agency and selfhood.



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Mythical Parallels with Gandhari

The mythological story of Gandhari evokes profound pathos when read alongside the life of Sita, Devi's mother. One day, Devi comes across an old photograph of her mother playing the veena. Curious about a side of her mother she had never known, she questions her grandmother, who responds by narrating the story of Gandhari, one of the most significant female figures in the Mahabharata. Gandhari was married into the prosperous Kuru dynasty, whose palace far surpassed the grandeur of her parental home:

> "The palace Gandhari was now to rule as queen was twice as big, twice as magnificent as her parents' palace. Priceless gems, the size of ripe pumpkins, hung at the tips of chandeliers, the marble pillars shone like mirrors. Four sentries at the prince's door bowed low as she approached them..." (Hariharan 28).

However, the splendour of the palace concealed a painful reality. When Gandhari met her husband for the first time, she discovered that he was blind, "the white eyes, the pupils glazed and useless" (Hariharan 29). Deeply hurt by the deception practised upon her, Gandhari tore a piece from her red skirt and blindfolded herself, resolving never to see the world again:

> "In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing. But she tore off a piece of her thick red skirt and tied it tightly over her own eyes. She groped towards her unseeing husband, her lips straight and thin with fury... She embraced her destiny—a blind husband—with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood" (Hariharan 29).

The grandmother's narration enables Devi to recognise a similar form of blindness in her own family. Gandhari's voluntary blindfold becomes a metaphor through which Devi begins to understand the silent sacrifices made by her mother, Sita. Before marriage, Sita was an independent, confident, and talented young woman whose parents encouraged her passion for music. So devoted was she to the veena that she brought it with her as part of her dowry. Every day, after completing the household chores, she devoted herself to music. One afternoon, while she was deeply absorbed in playing the veena, her father-in-law repeatedly called her to perform ordinary household tasks. Annoyed by her failure to respond immediately, he rebuked her:

> "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (Hariharan 30).

The question leaves Sita with no room to negotiate between her artistic identity and her domestic responsibilities. In a moment of profound emotional defeat, she removes the strings of the veena and quietly responds, "Yes. I am a wife, a daughter-in-law" (Hariharan 30). Thereafter,

> "...We never saw her touch the veena again. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised, and our household never heard that heart-rending music again" (Hariharan 30).

The symbolic parallels between Gandhari and Sita are unmistakable. Gandhari chooses blindness after discovering the truth about her husband, while Sita silences her music after marriage in

order to fulfil the expectations imposed upon her as a wife and daughter-in-law. In both narratives, women relinquish an essential part of their individuality in order to conform to patriarchal ideals of feminine virtue. Hariharan thus reinterprets Gandhari's blindfold not simply as an act of devotion but as a powerful symbol of the social conditioning that compels women to ignore injustice, suppress desire, and erase their individuality. What has traditionally been celebrated as sacrifice is exposed as a consequence of patriarchal coercion.

Through this parallel, Hariharan also critiques the cultural tendency to glorify women's silence. Gandhari's blindfold has often been remembered as the supreme example of wifely devotion, just as Sita's abandonment of music transforms her into the ideal daughter-in-law admired by society. Yet the novel questions the values underlying such admiration. In both cases, society rewards women only after they renounce their talents, aspirations, and personal desires. The myths therefore become instruments through which patriarchal culture normalises female self-effacement while presenting it as moral virtue.

For Devi, these stories become a means of recognising the invisible forms of oppression that govern women's lives. The grandmother's narratives encourage her not merely to admire mythical heroines but to reinterpret them critically. By placing Gandhari's myth beside Sita's lived experience, Hariharan demonstrates that the silence imposed upon women in mythology continues to find expression within contemporary domestic life. The novel therefore transforms myth into a critical discourse through which inherited cultural values are interrogated rather than accepted unquestioningly.

Significantly, towards the close of the novel, Sita is seen playing the veena once again. Although this moment occupies only a brief space in the narrative, it carries immense symbolic significance. The veena, long silenced by patriarchal expectations, once again becomes the medium through which Sita reconnects with the self she had sacrificed after marriage. Her return to music parallels Devi's own journey towards self-discovery, suggesting that the recovery of identity begins when women reclaim those aspects of themselves that patriarchy had compelled them to abandon. Thus, Hariharan offers not merely a critique of patriarchal tradition but also the possibility of renewal through memory, art, and self-expression.

Damayanti

The narrative next turns to the mythological story of Damayanti, another significant female figure whose story profoundly influences Devi's understanding of choice and agency. The grandmother recounts how a swayamvara was organised for Damayanti, attracting numerous kings as well as the gods: Indra, Agni, Varuna, and Yama. Nala, the prince of Nishadha, also arrives to seek her hand. The gods request Nala to act as their messenger and persuade Damayanti to choose one of them. However, even before the swayamvara, Damayanti has already fallen in love with Nala through his virtues and reputation. At the ceremony, the gods

assume Nala's appearance in an attempt to confuse her, yet Damayanti recognises the real Nala and garlands him, choosing human love over divine authority.

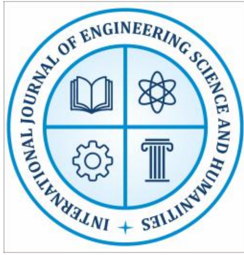
Hariharan invokes this myth not merely to retell an episode from the Mahabharata, but to foreground the idea of female choice. Damayanti's decision to choose her husband publicly represents one of the rare moments in Indian mythology where a woman exercises independent judgment in determining her own future. Although divine forces attempt to influence her decision, her unwavering conviction enables her to assert her individual desire over external authority. The myth thus becomes a celebration of female agency and emotional autonomy.

The significance of this story becomes evident when it is read alongside Devi's own life. Unlike Damayanti, Devi is never allowed to exercise such freedom in choosing her life partner. Despite her education abroad and exposure to a different social environment, she is gradually directed towards an arranged marriage with Mahesh, a decision shaped more by familial expectations than by her own emotional choice. The contrast between Damayanti's swayamvara and Devi's marriage exposes the widening gap between the symbolic freedoms celebrated in mythology and the restricted choices available to many contemporary women.

The myth therefore raises an important question that runs throughout the novel: if mythology could imagine a woman publicly choosing her husband, why is such agency denied to women in modern society? Hariharan employs Damayanti's story to challenge the assumption that tradition has always been uniformly oppressive. Instead, she selectively recovers those mythological moments that recognise female autonomy and juxtaposes them against contemporary patriarchal practices that continue to curtail women's freedom.

The story also leaves a lasting impression on Devi, particularly because it introduces her to the idea of the swayamvara as a symbol of women's right to choose. However, the reality she encounters stands in sharp contrast to this ideal. Women who have lived or studied abroad are often viewed with suspicion and are stereotyped as bold, sexually liberal, or morally unconventional. Devi herself becomes a victim of these social prejudices after returning from the United States. Rather than being appreciated for her education and intellectual growth, she is subtly judged through patriarchal assumptions about women's sexuality and independence. Consequently, the freedom represented by Damayanti's choice remains largely inaccessible in Devi's own life.

Through the parallel between Damayanti and Devi, Hariharan demonstrates that myth can function not merely as a repository of cultural memory but also as a critical instrument for exposing the contradictions within patriarchal society. While mythology preserves instances of female autonomy, contemporary social practices often deny women even those freedoms that ancient narratives were willing to acknowledge. By reclaiming Damayanti's story, Hariharan



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invites readers to reconsider inherited traditions and to recognise that the struggle for women's agency lies not in rejecting myth altogether but in reinterpreting it from a feminist perspective.

Tale of the Serpent-Bridegroom

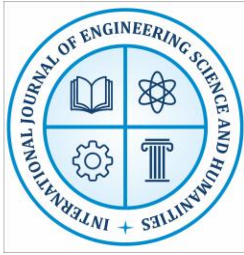
Hariharan further incorporates a fascinating folk tale of a serpent bridegroom to explore the complex realities of marriage and female endurance within patriarchal society. The story centres on a childless couple who pray earnestly for a child but are blessed instead with a snake. As the serpent grows up, his mother becomes anxious to find a suitable bride for him. Although his father initially hesitates, he eventually begins searching for a bride in distant lands. A wealthy man readily offers his beautiful daughter in marriage despite knowing that the prospective bridegroom is a snake.

When the young woman discovers the true form of her husband, she neither rebels nor expresses disappointment. Instead, she quietly accepts her fate, believing that "A girl is given only once in marriage" (Hariharan 60). During the night, however, the serpent sheds his skin and assumes the form of a handsome young man. Realising the truth, the bride burns the discarded snake skin, permanently freeing her husband from his serpent form. The tale symbolically reflects the themes of transformation, endurance, and rebirth that recur throughout Indian folklore.

Hariharan employs this folk narrative not merely as a fantastic tale but as a symbolic commentary on the institution of marriage. The serpent represents the unknown and often frightening reality that confronts many women after marriage. The bride's unquestioning acceptance reflects the cultural expectation that a woman must adjust to whatever circumstances await her in her marital home. At the same time, the eventual transformation of the serpent suggests the traditional belief that patience and endurance will ultimately be rewarded. The novel, however, complicates this idealised belief by juxtaposing the folk tale with the lived experiences of contemporary women.

This symbolic parallel becomes evident in the life of Gauri, the servant maid in Sita's household. Like the bride in the serpent story, Gauri spends years preparing for marriage, saving every possible rupee to meet the enormous dowry demanded by the groom's family. She tells Devi that fifty sovereigns of gold have been demanded, but she has managed to save only fifteen and must borrow the remainder from others. Marriage, which is culturally presented as a woman's ultimate fulfilment, thus becomes for Gauri a source of economic burden and emotional uncertainty.

Unlike the folk tale, however, Gauri's marriage does not culminate in miraculous transformation. The man she marries proves to be as cruel and exploitative as the serpent symbolically appears to be. Her hopes for happiness are gradually replaced by suffering and disillusionment. Eventually, Gauri seeks emotional fulfilment in a relationship with her husband's brother. Although society condemns her decision and brands it as immoral, the relationship enables her to reclaim a measure of emotional freedom and personal dignity that her marriage had denied her.



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By placing the serpent myth beside Gauri's experience, Hariharan deliberately subverts the reassuring moral often associated with traditional folk narratives. In folklore, the woman's patience transforms the serpent into an ideal husband; in reality, however, patience alone cannot transform oppressive social structures or abusive relationships. Through Gauri's story, the novelist questions the cultural belief that women must silently endure suffering in the hope that circumstances will eventually improve. Instead, she suggests that genuine transformation becomes possible only when women assert their own agency, even at the cost of social condemnation.

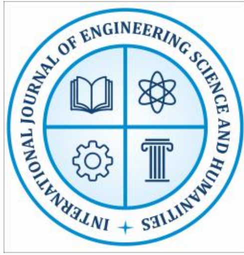
The juxtaposition of myth and reality once again illustrates Hariharan's larger narrative strategy. Myths and folk tales are neither discarded nor accepted uncritically; rather, they are reinterpreted to expose the contradictions of patriarchal culture. While traditional narratives often promise redemption through obedience and endurance, the novel reveals that contemporary women must actively negotiate their identities within oppressive social structures. Consequently, the serpent myth becomes another powerful metaphor through which Hariharan interrogates the ideals of marriage, sacrifice, and female virtue that continue to shape women's lives.

Myth of Ganga and Shantanu: Patriarchal expectations at its Zenith

Hariharan further explores the patriarchal construction of womanhood through the myth of Ganga and Shantanu, linking it with Devi's experience of childlessness and her gradual quest for selfhood. In the Mahabharata, King Shantanu encounters the beautiful Ganga on the banks of the river and falls in love with her. Ganga agrees to marry him on the condition that he will never question her actions. Fascinated by her beauty, Shantanu accepts the condition without hesitation. After their marriage, however, Ganga begins drowning each of her newborn sons in the river. Although devastated by the repeated loss of his children, Shantanu remains silent because of the promise he has made. When Ganga attempts to drown their eighth child, he finally breaks his silence, whereupon Ganga reveals her divine identity and departs, taking the child with her. In Hindu mythology, Ganga's actions ultimately serve a cosmic purpose, and the river itself is revered as a symbol of purification and liberation.

Hariharan reinterprets this myth by placing it alongside Devi's lived reality. Unlike the mythical narrative, where the death of the children is divinely ordained and spiritually justified, Devi's inability to conceive is rooted in the painful realities of ordinary life. The novel therefore shifts the focus from mythic destiny to the social expectations imposed upon women. Within the patriarchal framework of marriage, motherhood becomes the primary measure of feminine fulfilment, and a woman's identity is often evaluated through her ability to bear children and continue the family lineage.

Reflecting upon her own circumstances, Devi gradually realises the enormous pressure associated with motherhood and concludes:



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> "To be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to renew your wifely vows every day" (Hariharan 54).

This seemingly simple observation exposes the patriarchal logic governing marriage. Motherhood is not portrayed merely as an emotional relationship between a woman and her child; rather, it becomes inseparable from the performance of ideal wifehood. The statement reveals how women's identities are expected to revolve around continuous sacrifice, obedience, and emotional labour in order to gain social acceptance.

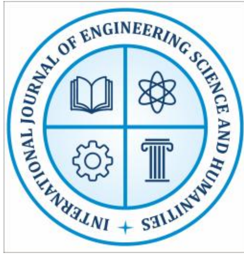
Even after several years of marriage, Devi remains childless, and the emotional distance between her and Mahesh continues to widen. Mahesh's business commitments keep him away from home for long periods, leaving Devi increasingly isolated within the domestic space. Her loneliness is further intensified after Baba leaves to care for his pregnant daughter, leaving only Devi and Mayamma in the house. It is during this period of emotional emptiness that Devi develops an interest in Gopal, a gifted musician whose sincerity and artistic devotion initially attract her.

Unlike Mahesh, Gopal appears capable of appreciating beauty, music, and emotional sensitivity. Drawn towards these qualities, Devi eventually leaves her husband and accompanies Gopal without informing anyone. At first glance, this decision may appear to be an act of romantic rebellion. However, Hariharan suggests that Devi's departure is motivated less by passionate love than by her desperate attempt to escape a marriage that has systematically denied her individuality, emotional fulfilment, and intellectual companionship. Leaving Mahesh therefore becomes an act of resistance against an institution that has reduced her identity to that of a neglected wife.

Yet Devi soon realises that Gopal's world offers no genuine liberation. Surrounded by admirers and absorbed in his musical career, he too fails to recognise Devi as an autonomous individual. At social gatherings she increasingly becomes conscious of the curious and objectifying gaze of those around her, who perceive her merely as another woman associated with a celebrated musician. Although Gopal advises her to ignore such looks, he remains largely indifferent to the deeper emotional isolation she experiences. Gradually, Devi recognises that her relationship with Gopal reproduces many of the same patriarchal assumptions from which she had attempted to escape.

Hariharan thus refuses to romanticise rebellion. Simply moving from one relationship to another does not guarantee freedom, because both Mahesh and Gopal, despite their contrasting personalities, fail to acknowledge Devi's individuality. One represents the materialistic world of domestic patriarchy, while the other embodies a more subtle form of masculine self-centredness disguised as artistic sensitivity. In both relationships, Devi's subjectivity remains marginalised.

This realisation becomes the turning point in Devi's journey. One night, after one of Gopal's parties, she quietly leaves him and begins her journey back to her mother. The return is neither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an admission of defeat nor a retreat into conventional domesticity. Instead, it symbolises Devi's rejection of identities imposed upon her by both marriage and romantic dependence. She understands that neither the role of the dutiful wife nor that of the rebellious lover can define her existence.

Towards the close of the novel, Devi recognises that she has spent years drifting "like a floating island searching for props." Her decision to return to her mother signifies her determination to recover a more authentic sense of self and "to stay and fight, to make sense of it all..." (Hariharan 139). Rather than seeking fulfilment through men or through socially prescribed roles, Devi begins to locate her identity within herself and within the shared experiences of women across generations. Through this symbolic homecoming, Hariharan suggests that selfhood is achieved not by escaping one's past but by critically confronting it. The myth of Ganga, therefore, becomes an important narrative framework through which the novel interrogates motherhood, marriage, female identity, and the patriarchal expectations that continue to define women's lives.

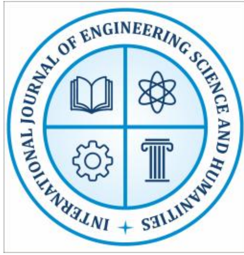
Mayamma: Silence and Resilience

Apart from revealing Parvathi's silent departure from the household in search of spiritual fulfilment, Mayamma's own life story provides yet another dimension to the novel's exploration of women's existence under patriarchy. After Devi leaves Mahesh's house and Mahesh himself remains away on business tours, Mayamma is left alone with her memories. Hariharan skillfully juxtaposes the present with the past as Mayamma recollects the painful events of her life, allowing the reader to witness another generation of feminine suffering. Through these recollections, the novel presents a deeply moving account of domestic violence, social oppression, and emotional endurance.

Married at the age of twelve, Mayamma enters a household where she is denied affection, dignity, and security. Her husband is an irresponsible drunkard and gambler who approaches her only to satisfy his physical desires. Marriage, which is conventionally idealised as a sacred institution, becomes for Mayamma a lifelong experience of exploitation. She never experiences companionship or emotional fulfilment; instead, she is reduced to performing the roles expected of a wife and daughter-in-law without receiving either love or recognition.

The greatest burden placed upon Mayamma is the expectation of motherhood. Her mother-in-law constantly scrutinises her body, waiting for signs of pregnancy. When conception does not occur immediately, Mayamma is branded as barren and subjected to relentless humiliation. She recalls one particularly horrifying episode:

> "What has your beauty done for you, you barren witch?... And she pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly ground spices into my barrenness. My burned thighs clamped together as I felt the devouring fire cling to my entrails" (Hariharan 114).



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This episode vividly exposes the violence inflicted upon women's bodies in the name of fertility and family honour. The female body becomes a site upon which patriarchal anxieties surrounding lineage and reproduction are violently inscribed. The abuse inflicted upon Mayamma is not merely physical but symbolic of a social order that values women primarily through their reproductive capacity.

Unable to conceive, Mayamma is compelled to observe endless fasts, perform rituals, and undertake acts of religious penance in the hope of altering her destiny. She faithfully obeys every instruction, waking before dawn each morning to pray and immerse herself in the village pond. Eventually, after years of suffering, she gives birth to a son. The birth appears to fulfil both her own longing for motherhood and her family's obsessive desire for an heir. She remembers the moment with painful irony:

> "Then the blood came soon and soon. No expense was spared, my husband wanted the new village doctor, not the midwife. He shoved his greasy hand into my swelling, palpitating womb. I could feel the pull, the excruciating pain of the thrust, his hand, my blood, my dying son. 'She is strong, she will bear many more children,' he said. But after Raja was born two years later, I still groaned with pain" (Hariharan 115).

Hariharan deliberately juxtaposes the joy traditionally associated with childbirth with the brutal physical suffering endured by women during pregnancy and delivery. Rather than romanticising motherhood, the novel foregrounds its painful bodily realities and exposes the indifference of a patriarchal society that regards women primarily as bearers of children.

Ironically, motherhood fails to liberate Mayamma from suffering. Her husband eventually abandons the family, leaving with all their savings, while her mother-in-law dies without ever acknowledging the injustice she had inflicted. Mayamma's son, Raja, gradually grows into another version of his father. He becomes abusive, irresponsible, and violent, directing towards his mother the very cruelty that she had endured throughout her married life. Patriarchy thus reproduces itself across generations, ensuring that violence continues despite the passage of time. When Raja finally dies after a prolonged illness, Mayamma weeps uncontrollably:

> "The day he died, Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life's handiwork: now all these had been snatched from her" (Hariharan 117).

Her grief extends far beyond the loss of a son. She mourns the destruction of her youth, the years sacrificed in silent endurance, and the complete absence of fulfilment in a life devoted entirely to others. Her tears become an expression of accumulated suffering rather than maternal bereavement alone.

Later, when Devi asks why she continued to endure such a painful existence, Mayamma responds with quiet wisdom rather than bitterness. Remembering the loss of her first child, she

recalls how both the village doctor and her mother-in-law blamed her for the tragedy. While the doctor attributed the loss to the supposed sins of her previous birth, her mother-in-law violently condemned her:

> "She slapped my cheeks hard, first this then the other. Her fists pummeled my breasts and my still swollen stomach till they had to pull her off my cowering, bleeding body. She shouted, in a rage mixed with fear, 'Do you need any more proof that this is not a woman? The barren witch has killed my grandson, and she lies there asking us why!'" (Hariharan 114).

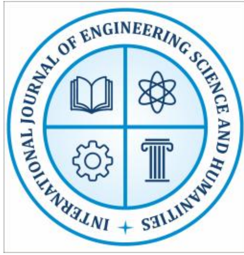
Through this harrowing episode, Hariharan exposes the intersection of superstition, patriarchy, and misogyny. Biological misfortune is transformed into moral guilt, while the woman herself becomes the object of blame and punishment. The accusation that Mayamma is "not a woman" demonstrates how female identity is narrowly defined through reproductive success, reducing womanhood to biological function alone.

Mayamma's story thus becomes one of the most powerful critiques of patriarchal society in The Thousand Faces of Night. Married in childhood, subjected to marital rape, condemned for infertility, forced into ritual penance, abandoned by her husband, and ultimately abused by her own son, she embodies the cumulative violence inflicted upon generations of women. Yet Hariharan does not portray her merely as a passive victim. Through her endurance, memory, and willingness to narrate her experiences to Devi, Mayamma transforms personal suffering into collective testimony. Her life becomes an alternative history of women—one that is absent from official records but preserved through oral memory and storytelling. In this way, Mayamma's narrative complements those of Devi, Sita, and the mythical women, demonstrating that although the forms of oppression may differ across generations, the struggle for dignity, identity, and selfhood remains a shared female experience.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night may be read as a profound exploration of women's quest for identity through the creative reinterpretation of Indian myths, epics, and folklore. Rather than treating mythology as a static cultural inheritance, Hariharan transforms it into a dynamic narrative strategy that interrogates patriarchal ideology and recovers women's suppressed histories. The stories of Amba, Gandhari, Damayanti, Ganga, and other mythical women do not function merely as parallel narratives; instead, they illuminate the experiences of contemporary women such as Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, revealing the continuity of gendered oppression across generations.

Devi's journey from an obedient daughter to a neglected wife, from an emotionally unfulfilling relationship with Mahesh to her disillusionment with Gopal, ultimately becomes a journey towards self-recognition rather than romantic fulfilment. Her return to her mother signifies



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neither defeat nor submission but the beginning of a conscious search for an authentic identity beyond the roles traditionally assigned to women. In rejecting both passive endurance and illusory escape, Devi gradually learns that selfhood can only emerge through self-awareness and the courage to question inherited social structures.

The novel further demonstrates that patriarchal oppression manifests itself in multiple forms. While Sita sacrifices her artistic identity in order to become the ideal wife and daughter-in-law, Mayamma endures a lifetime of physical, emotional, and psychological violence in the name of marriage, motherhood, and family honour. Their experiences reveal that patriarchy is sustained not only through individual acts of domination but also through deeply embedded cultural traditions, social expectations, and inherited myths that normalise female sacrifice and silence.

At the same time, Hariharan does not reject mythology itself. Instead, she reclaims myth as a powerful site of feminist reinterpretation. Figures such as Amba, Gandhari, Damayanti, and Ganga acquire renewed significance when read alongside the lives of modern women. Through these parallels, the novel challenges conventional patriarchal readings of mythology and demonstrates that myths possess the potential to inspire resistance, self-reflection, and transformation as much as they have historically been used to legitimise female submission.

Equally significant is Hariharan's narrative technique. The novel's fragmented structure, movement between past and present, and interweaving of memory, folklore, and lived experience reflect the complex realities of women's lives. Myth and reality, memory and history, individual experience and collective consciousness continuously intersect, suggesting that women's identities are shaped through an ongoing dialogue between inherited traditions and personal acts of resistance.

Ultimately, The Thousand Faces of Night presents storytelling itself as an act of liberation. By recovering forgotten voices and reinterpreting familiar myths from women's perspectives, Hariharan enables her female characters to challenge patriarchal authority and redefine their identities on their own terms. The novel thus affirms that myth is not merely a repository of cultural memory but a living discourse through which women can question oppressive traditions, reclaim their voices, and imagine alternative possibilities of existence. In doing so, Hariharan establishes The Thousand Faces of Night as one of the most significant feminist reinterpretations of mythology in contemporary Indian English fiction.

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