



Rewriting Women's Destinies: A Feminist Reading of Myth and Agency in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract: Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* reimagines Indian mythology and folklore through a feminist lens, critically examining the interplay between tradition, patriarchy, and female agency. The novel juxtaposes mythical narratives with the lived experiences of contemporary women, illustrating how cultural conditioning reinforces gender roles while also offering subversive spaces for resistance. Hariharan's portrayal of Devi, Sita, and Mayamma reflects the constraints imposed on women by cultural expectations while also highlighting their varied modes of negotiation and defiance. Drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Third World feminism, the paper examines how the female protagonists reclaim agency despite being relegated to the margins. Furthermore, it interrogates the role of mythology as both a tool of oppression and a site of potential emancipation. Critics such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have emphasized the need for reinterpreting classical narratives to uncover silenced female voices, a perspective that aligns with Hariharan's literary strategy. By deconstructing the patriarchal underpinnings of myth and reality, this study argues that *The Thousand Faces of Night* offers a critical feminist discourse that challenges normative representations of Indian womanhood, advocating for self-definition beyond societal prescriptions.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan; Indian Mythology; Feminist Reinterpretation; Female Agency; Patriarchy.

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Introduction

In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the complex interplay between mythology and gender is explored through a feminist lens that critiques the patriarchal systems shaping women's lives. Drawing on Indian myths, Hariharan exposes how these stories perpetuate traditional roles that confine women to subjugation and silence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity illuminates how the marginalized, particularly women in patriarchal societies, are often denied a voice in the dominant discourse. Spivak asserts, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 104), which reflects the erasure of female agency within both colonial and postcolonial narratives. In this framework, the female characters in Hariharan's novel are placed in a position where their voices are muted by both historical and cultural structures. However, *The Thousand Faces of Night* offers a counter-narrative by creating spaces for women to speak, resist, and redefine their destinies, even as they grapple with the oppressive structures that seek to silence them. As Spivak further argues, "In the context of imperialism and the oppression of the subaltern, the question of voice and agency becomes central to the political and literary project" (Spivak 285). By deconstructing these myths, Hariharan gives her characters, such as Devi and her mother, the opportunity to challenge their prescribed roles, representing a feminist reclamation of voice and autonomy. This reclamation echoes Spivak's notion of reclaiming the subaltern's voice, where resistance becomes a means of both survival and empowerment.

Furthermore, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Third World feminism offers insight into how the novel critiques the intersectionality of oppression, where gender, class, and culture converge to limit women's choices. Mohanty critiques the tendency to homogenize women in the Global South, noting that "the 'third world woman' is often depicted as homogeneous, and her oppression seen as monolithic" (Mohanty 61). In contrast, *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents diverse female experiences within the Indian context, showing that women's lives are not defined by a singular, universal oppression but are shaped by various socio-cultural factors. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue in their analysis of feminist literary reinterpretation, "By re-imagining traditional narratives, we allow for new, empowering spaces for women to exist within" (Tharu and Lalita 121). Through these lenses, Hariharan's novel does not merely critique patriarchal structures but actively rewrites them, offering women the chance to reshape their destinies in ways that defy both mythical and societal limitations. This process of reimagining and reconstructing myth and agency forms the core of this paper's argument, demonstrating how *The Thousand Faces of Night* serves as a

transformative text for understanding female empowerment within the context of Indian mythology.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan strategically employs mythology to critique the patriarchal systems that shape women's roles and perpetuate their subjugation. The novel draws on the figures of Sita, Draupadi, and Gandhari—iconic women from Hindu epics whose fates are determined by patriarchal expectations. Hariharan uses these mythological figures as a lens through which to examine the roles imposed on contemporary women. For instance, Devi, the protagonist, reflects on the myth of Sita, saying, "I, too, am like Sita...exiled, betrayed, alone" (Hariharan 89). This comparison highlights how Devi's own life is bound by the ideals of submission and suffering that characterize Sita's story. As Sita endures exile and separation from her husband Rama, Devi finds herself trapped in a similarly disempowered marriage with Anant, where her desires and voice are suppressed. Sita's journey, defined by sacrifice and endurance, becomes a model for Devi, who is expected to embody those same qualities. The novel's references to mythological women, such as Draupadi, who endures public humiliation and suffering, further illuminate how these ancient stories are used as templates for contemporary female identity. Devi's thoughts on Draupadi reveal the same cultural conditioning: "I, too, am Draupadi, standing before the men, naked, ashamed, silent" (Hariharan 107). Through these references, Hariharan critiques how the stories of these mythical women have been used as moral blueprints that continue to shape the expectations placed upon women in modern society.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", patriarchal structures often silence women, rendering their resistance invisible within dominant discourses. Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 104) underscores the ways in which women's voices are marginalized in both myth and reality. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the mythical figures of Sita and Draupadi serve as silent 'subalterns,' whose actions and experiences are often interpreted through male perspectives. Devi's own marriage reflects this dynamic, as her voice and desires are overshadowed by patriarchal expectations. Her internal struggle is evident when she reflects on her marriage, saying, "I had thought he would understand...but he only saw me as a symbol of his dream of perfect womanhood" (Hariharan 72). Devi's realization that her husband views her as an idealized image—rather than as a woman with independent desires and agency—exposes how deeply ingrained these patriarchal myths remain in contemporary society. The myth of womanhood, as shaped by figures like Sita and Draupadi, continues to silence and constrain Devi, much like the subaltern in Spivak's theory. The protagonist's experience in her marriage becomes a metaphor for the way these mythic ideals perpetuate the subjugation of women, both in the past and in the present.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the idea that women's struggles are solely defined by personal suffering and sacrifice. Devi's thoughts on her relationship with Anant reveal the tension between her personal identity and the mythic roles she is expected to fulfill. She muses, "I thought I would find peace with him, a kind of sanctuary...instead, I have found a prison, a silence" (Hariharan 81). Here, Devi's inner turmoil underscores the way patriarchal myths create a disjunction between women's lived realities and the idealized expectations placed upon them. These myths, while providing a framework for understanding women's roles in society, also limit their capacity for resistance and self-expression. As Spivak notes, "the subaltern is not just silenced but spoken for" (Spivak 283), a sentiment that rings true for the women in Hariharan's novel. The patriarchal structures embedded in the myths of Sita and Draupadi effectively "speak for" women, dictating their actions and desires. However, *The Thousand Faces of Night* offers a feminist reinterpretation of these myths, giving Devi and other female characters the opportunity to reclaim their voices. In this way, the novel presents a critical exploration of how mythology, when reimagined, can become a site of resistance, where women can rewrite their destinies and challenge the oppressive structures that have defined them for centuries.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan uses mythology not only as a tool of oppression but also as a site for feminist subversion and resistance. Through the reimagining of classical myths, Hariharan challenges the patriarchal narratives that have historically silenced women. Devi's character, in particular, undergoes a transformation that reflects an evolution from passive acceptance to active self-assertion. Unlike the mythical Sita, who embodies passive endurance and suffering, Devi refuses to accept these same roles. In her journey, she consciously rejects suffering as a virtue, asserting, "I will not be a woman who is only remembered for her sacrifice" (Hariharan 134). This pivotal moment in the novel marks her rejection of the mythic ideal of womanhood as one defined by silent suffering. By positioning Devi as a character who seeks to actively shape her destiny, Hariharan critiques the traditional narrative of women's lives as subjugated and sacrificial. This aligns with Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's argument in *Women's Writing in India*, where they contend that feminist re-readings of classical narratives can offer alternative representations of female strength: "By reinterpreting mythology, we can allow for the emergence of voices that have been silenced" (Tharu and Lalita 108). Hariharan, through Devi, subverts the traditional depiction of womanhood as passive, instead offering a model of resistance and self-assertion. Devi's rejection of her prescribed role is a direct challenge to the mythological constructions of women, signaling a shift toward the feminist reclamation of female agency in contemporary contexts.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalizing the experiences of Third World women further illuminates Hariharan's feminist subversion. In *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty (1988) critiques the tendency to homogenize women in the Global South, pointing out that "the 'Third World woman' is often depicted as homogeneous, and her oppression seen as monolithic" (Mohanty 61). Hariharan resists this reductionist portrayal of women as mere victims of oppression. Instead, she presents a range of female responses to patriarchal control, highlighting how women navigate their own forms of resistance within the same overarching oppressive structures. Devi's personal rebellion against traditional roles contrasts with the endurance of other women in the novel, such as Mayamma, who accepts her servitude but does so with a quiet form of resistance. Mayamma reflects, "I have lived in silence for so long, I do not know how to speak" (Hariharan 92). Mayamma's endurance and acceptance of her fate, while seemingly passive, is a form of resistance in itself—one that resists the societal pressure for rebellion, instead focusing on survival within oppressive structures. Devi's eventual rejection of domestic servitude—symbolized by her decision to leave her marriage—is a direct challenge to these structures, demonstrating the novel's exploration of multiple forms of resistance. This complexity reinforces Mohanty's argument that feminist discourse must account for diverse experiences of oppression rather than impose a singular trajectory of emancipation. Hariharan's nuanced portrayal of resistance, through characters like Mayamma and Devi, captures the intricacies of female agency within patriarchal systems, offering a more comprehensive view of women's experiences that transcends simplistic narratives of victimhood.

In this way, *The Thousand Faces of Night* not only critiques patriarchal control but also redefines the notion of resistance, suggesting that women's agency can manifest in various forms. Devi's journey of self-assertion contrasts with Mayamma's quiet endurance, but both characters challenge the restrictive roles assigned to women by society and myth. Through this, Hariharan underscores the importance of acknowledging the diversity of women's experiences and the multiple ways in which they resist oppression. By reinterpreting mythology, Hariharan opens up space for women to rewrite their destinies, offering a feminist vision of strength that is as diverse and multifaceted as the women themselves.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan critiques the domestic sphere as a space where patriarchal ideologies are both enforced and contested. The home, traditionally seen as the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's life in Indian mythology, becomes a space of confinement and repression for Devi. This tension between the idealized vision of marriage and its restrictive reality is made clear when Devi reflects on her mother's teachings, which

emphasized endurance as the key to female strength: “My mother had always told me that suffering was the price of womanhood, that one could not be a woman without sacrifice” (Hariharan 47). Devi’s mother, shaped by societal expectations and the patriarchal script of womanhood, instills in her daughter the belief that a woman’s value lies in her ability to endure suffering in silence. This notion is consistent with the mythological archetype of women like Sita, who is revered for her sacrifice and patience. However, as Devi’s dissatisfaction with her marriage grows, she begins to challenge these inherited beliefs. Spivak’s theory of the subaltern woman’s struggle to articulate her agency is particularly relevant here, as Devi’s journey mirrors Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 104). Initially, Devi is silenced by the expectations of marital duty, but her growing disillusionment marks a critical shift. She moves from silent acceptance to a conscious rejection of the patriarchal norms that confine her. The novel thus portrays the home as both a site of oppression and a potential space for female liberation, with Devi’s evolving consciousness serving as a critique of the traditional roles that women are expected to play.

Mayamma, another key character in the novel, reinforces this critique of the domestic sphere. As a servant in a household governed by rigid gender hierarchies, Mayamma embodies the resilience of countless marginalized women whose struggles often go unnoticed. Although she occupies a subservient role, Mayamma’s endurance and quiet defiance challenge the notion of complete female passivity. She reflects, “I have lived in silence for so long, I do not know how to speak” (Hariharan 92), signifying her internal struggle and the unspoken resilience that defines her life. While she may not openly resist the patriarchal systems that control her, Mayamma subverts them through her survival. Lalita’s perspective on feminist literary resistance suggests that women, even within oppressive structures, find ways to negotiate spaces of autonomy. According to Lalita, “Feminist resistance in literature can often be found not in grand acts of rebellion, but in the quiet, everyday negotiations women make to maintain their dignity and sense of self” (Lalita 58). Mayamma’s endurance and subtle defiance are emblematic of this form of resistance. Her quiet survival within the rigid boundaries of domestic servitude can be understood as a negotiation of power within a patriarchal system, where women like her carve out small spaces of autonomy in an otherwise oppressive environment.

Devi’s eventual departure from her marriage and her quest for independence further reinforce this theme of resistance. By rejecting the domestic confines of marriage, Devi reclaims her agency and challenges the societal scripts that define a woman’s worth by her role as wife and mother. She reflects, “I left him not because I hated him, but because I could no longer live a life I did not choose” (Hariharan

135). This act of self-assertion symbolizes the rejection of the traditional domestic roles that have confined women for centuries. Devi’s transformation is not merely personal but political, as she challenges the ideological structures that have historically defined and limited women’s lives. Through Devi and Mayamma, *The Thousand Faces of Night* critiques the home as a space of both oppression and liberation, where women navigate the complex interplay of patriarchal norms and personal agency.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan demonstrates that mythology, while historically used to justify patriarchal norms, can be reclaimed and reimagined as a tool for feminist empowerment. Rather than merely deconstructing these narratives, Hariharan offers a reconstruction of these stories, positioning them as potential sources of female agency and identity. For instance, Devi’s engagement with the mythology surrounding figures like Sita and Draupadi evolves from a passive acceptance of their roles to a critical reinterpretation. In contrast to Sita’s passive suffering, Devi asserts, “I will not be the Sita who stays silent, waiting for rescue. I will be the one who speaks” (Hariharan 112). Through this declaration, Devi rejects the idealized narrative of womanhood defined by sacrifice and suffering, actively rewriting her own story. By drawing on mythology but transforming its meanings, Hariharan suggests that these cultural texts, which have been used to enforce patriarchal control, can be reclaimed and reimagined to foster empowerment. This feminist engagement with mythology challenges the idea that these stories are static or unchangeable, offering alternative possibilities for female identity.

This approach aligns with Tharu and Lalita’s advocacy for feminist reinterpretation of historical and cultural texts, as they argue that dominant narratives must be challenged from within, rather than being rejected outright. In *Women’s Writing in India*, Tharu and Lalita emphasize that “women’s writing in India has often engaged with the cultural, religious, and mythological traditions that have shaped their lives, rewriting them to reflect the realities of contemporary women” (Tharu and Lalita 98). In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan engages with these very traditions, offering a nuanced feminist critique that acknowledges both the power and limitations of inherited cultural stories. Devi’s rejection of the passive role traditionally assigned to women in Hindu mythology is a prime example of this feminist reinterpretation. Rather than denying the relevance of these myths, Hariharan invites readers to re-engage with them, critically reassessing their implications and potential for empowerment.

Through this feminist lens, the novel acknowledges the ways in which mythology has been used to perpetuate patriarchal structures while also suggesting that it can serve as a site of resistance. By engaging with these narratives

critically, the women in the novel are able to challenge the roles assigned to them and reconstruct their identities. Devi's transformation, from a woman defined by silence and sacrifice to one who asserts her voice and agency, reflects this possibility of reclamation. As Devi herself realizes, "I can no longer be the woman you have made me. I must become the woman I have chosen to be" (Hariharan 130). This shift signifies the reclamation of mythological narratives, turning them from a tool of subjugation into one of empowerment. In this way, *The Thousand Faces of Night* exemplifies the potential for feminist reinterpretation of mythology, suggesting that these stories, when viewed through a critical lens, can offer alternative narratives of strength and autonomy for women.

In conclusion, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* critically examines how mythology, tradition, and domestic spaces shape and constrain women's identities, while also creating opportunities for female agency and resistance. By rewriting mythological narratives, Hariharan challenges patriarchal norms and reconstructs these stories as sources of empowerment. Drawing on Spivak's theory of subalternity, this paper has shown how the novel subverts the silencing of women by illustrating their evolving agency, as Devi and other characters move from passive acceptance to active resistance. Additionally, Mohanty's critique of Third World feminism and Tharu and Lalita's framework of feminist literary resistance illuminate how the novel portrays diverse female responses to oppression, emphasizing that resistance is multifaceted. *The Thousand Faces of Night* reimagines Indian mythology not as a tool of subjugation, but as a space for feminist empowerment, asserting the importance of self-definition beyond patriarchal prescriptions. In this way, the novel offers a vision of womanhood that transcends traditional boundaries and advocates for the power of rewriting mythology as an act of resistance.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* offers a compelling feminist reinterpretation of Indian mythology

by exposing how traditional narratives reinforce patriarchal ideals of womanhood, sacrifice, obedience, and silence. Through Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, the novel presents diverse experiences of oppression and resistance, demonstrating that women's agency may emerge through open rebellion, self-definition, quiet endurance, or everyday negotiation. Devi's journey from conformity to self-assertion particularly reflects her rejection of the roles prescribed by marriage, family, and myth.

Viewed through Spivak's concept of subalternity and Mohanty's critique of the homogenisation of Third World women, the novel reveals how women's voices are shaped and suppressed by intersecting cultural, social, and domestic structures. Nevertheless, Hariharan does not portray women merely as passive victims. By retelling myths from female perspectives, she transforms mythology from an instrument of patriarchal control into a space for questioning, resistance, and emancipation. Ultimately, *The Thousand Faces of Night* challenges fixed representations of Indian womanhood and affirms women's right to reclaim their voices, redefine their identities, and rewrite their destinies beyond societal prescriptions.

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