

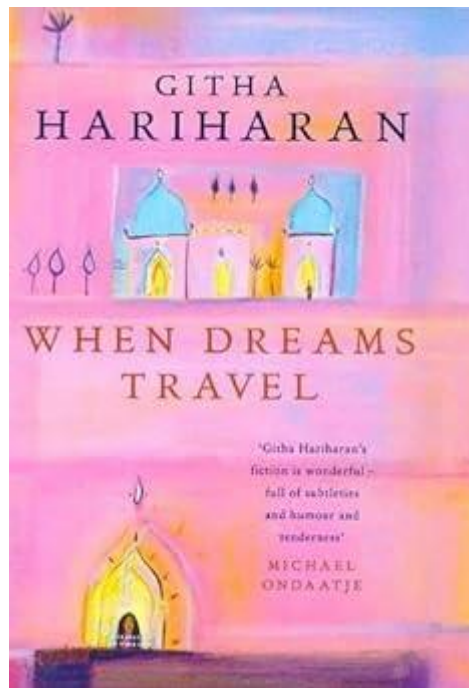
Through the Kaleidoscope: Diverse Women's Voices in Gittha Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*

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Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Abstract

This research paper explores the nuanced portrayal of women's perspectives in Gittha Hariharan's novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*. Both works delve into the complexities of feminine identity, agency, and the societal constraints that shape women's experiences. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the narrative examines the lives of several women navigating patriarchal structures, emphasizing their struggles for autonomy and self-definition. Through characters like Mayamma and Devi, Hariharan illustrates the interplay

between tradition and modernity, highlighting the multifaceted nature of women's roles in society. Similarly, *When Dreams Travel* reimagines the story of Shahrazad from *One Thousand and One Nights*, focusing on the power of storytelling as a means of resistance and self-expression. Here, Shahrazad's ability to craft narratives allows her to challenge patriarchal oppression and reclaim her voice, while her sister Duniyazad represents the silent strength and support of sisterhood. This comparative analysis reveals how both novels utilize the theme of storytelling to explore women's desires, aspirations, and the quest for identity. Ultimately, the paper argues that Githa Hariharan's work offers a profound commentary on feminine consciousness, revealing the resilience and complexity of women's lives in contemporary society.

Keywords: Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, Women's perspectives, feminist narratives, autonomy, patriarchy, feminist discourse.

Introduction

Githa Hariharan, a feminist author, has been regarded as one of the most influential Indian women writers of contemporary literature. Being a female author, the feminist perspective influences all aspect of her creative work. Githa Hariharan's novels are exploring the feminist phenomena in a beautiful and systematic manner which depicts vivid picture of patriarchy dominance in social life and revolting against such a system. 'Female consciousness' is the gist of her all the novels. Hence, the novelist has loudly presented these marginalized voices of Indian women.

Githa Hariharan was raised in Manila and Mumbai, respectively, after being born in 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. She graduated with a B.A. in English from Mumbai University and an MA in Communication from Fairfield University. She started her work as an editor at an Indian publishing business after working for the public radio system in New York. Later on, she gained experience as an editor in Mumbai, Chennai, and New Delhi, three major Indian cities. She had amazing experiences in a multicultural lifestyle growing up in Mumbai and Coimbatore, which enabled her to portray societal realities with a bird's eye view.

The Thousand Faces of Night (1992), Githa Hariharan's debut book, was awarded the esteemed "Commonwealth Writers' Prize" in 1993. Githa Hariharan has also written a story collection *The Art of Dying* (1993), and the other debut novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003), *Fugitive Histories* (2009) and the latest novel *I Have Become the Tide* (2019). The greatest talent of Githa Hariharan's writing is her capacity to enchant readers with tales, poetry, and enchantment found in even the most straightforward of phrases. Her works are all about the underrepresented voices and spaces that are masterfully written and obviously highly individual.

Githa Hariharan's novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999) offer a compelling exploration of the complexities of womanhood in a world shaped by patriarchal structures, tradition, and myth. By drawing from diverse narrative traditions—ranging from Indian folklore to classical mythology—Hariharan weaves intricate tales that challenge conventional notions of gender roles and societal expectations. Her work stands at the intersection of myth and reality, reimagining women's stories in ways that highlight their struggles for agency, autonomy, and self-actualization.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan presents the lives of three generations of women—Devi, her mother Sita, and their servant Mayamma—whose experiences are bound by the traditions and expectations of a patriarchal society. Through their interconnected narratives, Hariharan critiques the limited roles assigned to women, emphasizing their silent suffering, but also their resilience and capacity for resistance.

Similarly, *When Dreams Travel* takes inspiration from the *Arabian Nights* to craft a fantastical narrative that interrogates the power dynamics between men and women, with a focus on the act of storytelling as a tool for subverting patriarchal authority. In this novel, Hariharan deconstructs the familiar tales of Scheherazade, transforming them into a meditation on desire, silence, and the reclaiming of female voices.

This paper seeks to examine the nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in these two novels, focusing on how Hariharan reclaims feminine agency through her characters' journeys. Through a feminist lens, the analysis will explore the themes of autonomy, identity, and resistance that pervade these works. Hariharan's narrative techniques—particularly her use of myth, symbolism, and intertextuality—will be examined to understand how she uses

storytelling as a means of both reflection and resistance. Ultimately, this study aims to illuminate the ways in which Hariharan's fiction not only critiques patriarchal systems but also reimagines spaces of empowerment for women within those systems.

By analyzing *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*, this paper will contribute to the ongoing discourse on feminist literary criticism, with a specific focus on the intersection of mythology, gender, and narrative agency. Hariharan's work challenges readers to consider how women's stories can be reclaimed and reinterpreted, providing new perspectives on the roles women can play both in literature and in life.

Review of Literature

Butler, Judith, 1990. Butler's concept of gender as a performative construct offers a foundational lens through which to analyze Hariharan's depiction of women, particularly their efforts to navigate and resist traditional gender roles.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1988. Spivak's work on subaltern studies is relevant in examining how Hariharan gives voice to marginalized female characters, especially within the context of postcolonial feminist critique. Showalter,

Elaine, 1977. Showalter's feminist literary theory explores the notion of a female literary tradition, which can be applied to understanding Hariharan's contribution to feminist discourse in Indian literature.

Rich, Adrienne, 1976. Rich's work on motherhood provides insight into the roles and expectations of women, which is a central theme in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, where Hariharan explores maternal figures and their societal constraints.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, 2003. Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse is crucial for understanding the intersection of gender, culture, and colonialism in Hariharan's novels, particularly in the portrayal of diverse Indian women.

Nussbaum, Martha C, 2000. Nussbaum's capabilities approach helps contextualize the struggles for autonomy and agency in Hariharan's female characters, highlighting their quests for freedom and self-expression.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 24:10 October 2024

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Tandon, 2008.Tandon’s comprehensive overview of feminist literary theories aids in analyzing Hariharan’s texts from a feminist perspective, focusing on the shift from traditional to modern representations of women.

Chakravarty, Radha, 2008. Chakravarty’s analysis of women writers in postcolonial India provides a direct context for Hariharan’s work, emphasizing themes of subjectivity and identity in her female characters.

Desai, Neera, 1987. Desai’s sociological study of Indian women’s roles and challenges in a patriarchal society offers a backdrop for the societal critique evident in Hariharan’s portrayal of female characters.

Mazumdar, Vina. 1985. This work gives historical context to the feminist movement in India, essential for understanding the feminist underpinnings of Hariharan’s novels.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, 1971. Mukherjee’s study on the Indian English novel helps in situating Hariharan’s works within the broader scope of Indian literature in English, focusing on narrative strategies and themes.

Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, 1991. This anthology is valuable for contextualizing Hariharan’s contribution to the tradition of Indian women writers, particularly in relation to themes of resistance and reclamation of voice.

Narayan, Uma, 1997. Narayan’s critique of cultural essentialism and third-world feminism provides a framework to examine how Hariharan’s female characters navigate cultural expectations while asserting their individual identities.

Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, 1989. This collection of essays on gender and colonial history in India is relevant for understanding the historical contexts that inform Hariharan’s feminist narratives.

Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder, 1993. Rajan’s exploration of the intersection between postcolonial theory and gender issues helps in analyzing how Hariharan’s novels challenge both cultural and gender norms.

Seshadri, Vijayalakshmi, 2017. This work discusses the evolving feminist discourse in India, making it useful for understanding how Hariharan's works reflect shifting narratives of identity in Indian women's experiences.

Patel, Sujata, 1995. Patel's study of gender relations in Indian mythology can be linked to Hariharan's reworking of mythological narratives in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*.

Singh, Anita, 2009. Singh's exploration of feminist literary theory provides tools for a critical analysis of Hariharan's narratives, particularly in relation to how women's voices are constructed and deconstructed.

Ganguly, Keya, 2001. Ganguly's discussion of postcolonial identity formation in everyday life is relevant to understanding how Hariharan's female characters navigate the intersection of personal and social identities.

Gandhi, Leela, 1998. Gandhi's work on postcolonial theory aids in situating Hariharan's novels within the broader discourse on postcolonial literature, particularly with respect to feminist interventions in narrative form.

Findings, Discussion and Analysis

Novels by Githa Hariharan are essentially stories about women—their histories, myths, gender politics, dilemmas, news, and neuroses. In an attempt to break free from the precarious hold of patriarchal control, representative women's stories are being heard. Githa Hariharan recently commented of her creative works that "*All my writing works at making a small space spacious*". She claims a "space" of gender, power, memory, and narrative for herself in these novels, but it does not mean a small—the space of gender, power, memory, and narrative.

Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* deals with the power of myth in Indian society, and the hold that myth has on women. Hariharan attempts to redefine the rituals in today's context. In the novel, she brings in a link between three generations of women – Mayamma the oldest woman, Sita, the mother of the protagonist of the novel, and Devi the youngest in the novel. Devi, the chief protagonist returns to Tamil Nadu after her US

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 24:10 October 2024

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education, where she had tasted a degree of independence and self-expression. She is portrayed as a modern contemporary woman. Sita, the mother of Devi tries to cope with tradition as well as with modernity. In her childhood, Devi is deeply impressed by her grandmother's stories of mythical women from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata where She got a chance to hear the stories of these selfless, brave and courageous women. These legendary heroines were Damayanti, Gandhari, Sita, Amba and others.

Devi's mother Sita fixes Devi's match with Mahesh and Devi agrees to a negotiated marriage like a good Indian girl by giving respect to her mother's words. Devi is soon married off to Mahesh, an arrangement that symbolizes the societal norm where a woman's identity is largely tied to her husband. Githa Hariharan wants to bring into notice that women do not live happily after marriage, they become resentful as they face restriction. Devi, finds her marriage a mere imprisonment, feels a sense of hollowness, but finds solace in the company of the singer Gopal, she further realizes that his companionship is also just an attraction and leaves him behind to get rid of all things. Devi regrets,

"I am no one, she thought, as she swept along in the rich current of Gopal's voice. I have no husband or lover, only this blissful company in the darkness, filled with a raga that reaches higher and higher, beyond the earth-bound demands of passion".

Devi was obviously hoping for a marriage that would perfectly unite two people. However, Mahesh believed that marriage was a societal duty, much like the majority of Indian males do. Within a short while, Devi starts to experience "amazing loneliness" and a sense of "uselessness." When she encounters Gopal, she believes she may pursue her unsatisfied feminine urges with him while in this mental state. After a few months, she quickly loses hope with him.

The Thousand Faces of Night is holding a crystal mirror of Indian ways of life, dreams and visions. It is telling secret saga of many Indian women of different categories who have multiplicity of faces/identities and roles to play that are defined and conditioned by the cultural tradition, religion and myths. They are identified with multiple faces and roles as daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, sisters-in-law and mother/motherhood/womanhood.

This novel depicts the miserable situation of a childless mother, a barren woman, Mayamma who was inhumanly treated by her mothers-in-law and husband. She tried her best to do every possible way to bear a child. Finally, it was successfully unsuccessful because after ten-year long perseverance she got pregnant but the baby she gave birth was dead. It frustrated her husband's family. She was treated as an outcaste and finally she was driven away from her husband's house. She spent rest of her life as a servant and caretaker of Mahesh's house.

Hariharan quotes from Hindu scriptures to show how a childless woman is enjoined to do penance, "*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, the hungry predatory fish devouring your feet.*"

Indian concept and vision of marriage are quite different as they are primarily arranged marriages. Love and friendship develop after marriage. Generally speaking, a childless wife or woman is not treated well, she does not have much respect and position in Indian society. There are thousands of Indian women like Mayamma who are ill-treated for their barrenness. They lead a miserable life.

Sita, Devi's mother was also neglected who could not continue with her music, playing veena which was her only thing of pleasure in life. when her father-in-law summons Sita and wants her to attend to his work, she cannot hear him as she is engrossed in playing on the veena. Her father-in-law reaches her room before and roars, "*Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?*" In that moment of despair, she wrenches out the strings the veena from their wooden base and asserts: *Yes, I am a wife, a daughter-in-law*". After that incident, Sita doesn't touch the veena but devotes her life only to serve the family. Sita has now one straight path to tread is wifhood. She had to make this choice because of her wedlock.

In Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*, the women's perspective is central to the narrative, deeply rooted in themes of agency, power, identity, and resistance within a patriarchal society. Hariharan revisits the classic *One Thousand and One Nights* tales through a feminist lens, subverting traditional gender roles and re-imagining the power dynamics between men and women. Through the lives of Shahrazad, Dunyazad, and other women in the novel, Hariharan critiques the ways in which women have been historically marginalized, silenced, and controlled, while also celebrating their resilience and capacity for transformation.

Shahrazad, the protagonist, is a symbol of female agency and power in *When Dreams Travel*. In the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, she is known for her wit and storytelling abilities, which she uses to survive the wrath of King Shahryar, who marries and kills a new bride every night after being betrayed by his first wife. In Hariharan's retelling, Shahrazad's storytelling takes on even greater significance as a form of resistance against the violence and oppression inflicted upon women.

Githa Hariharan's Shahrazad is not merely a survivor but a woman who understands the power of the female voice in subverting male control. Through her stories, she delays her death, but more importantly, she shifts the power dynamics between herself and Shahryar. Her ability to captivate the king through her tales turns the act of storytelling into a political weapon—one that allows her to escape violence while transforming the king's perspective. She reclaims agency by controlling the narrative, showing how women can manipulate the space that restricts them and reflects Shahrazad's awareness of how she can subvert the king's control over her life:

*"She told him stories that slipped through the bars of time,
of the body, of death, and made the bloodthirsty King wait."*

The novel also challenges traditional representations of female sexuality and desire, which are often controlled and dictated by male authority. Shahrazad, in her storytelling, reclaims female desire from the gaze of men:

*"In her stories, the women desired fiercely. Their bodies
pulsed with passion; they claimed their lovers."*

This line is a powerful reclamation of female sexual agency. Rather than being passive objects of male desire, the women in Shahrazad's stories actively claim their own pleasure and their lovers, challenging the cultural narrative that limits female desire to silence and submission.

Hariharan's novel also brings to the forefront the story of Dunyazad, Shahrazad's younger sister. In the traditional *Nights*, Dunyazad is a largely forgotten character, a passive witness to Shahrazad's storytelling. However, in *When Dreams Travel*, Dunyazad becomes a fully developed character whose perspective challenges the conventional portrayal of women. Dunyazad represents the voices of women who often live in the shadow of more dominant figures, highlighting the complexities of sisterhood, rivalry, and shared oppression. Her

perspective offers a more intimate view of Shahrazad's struggle, while also reflecting her own journey towards self-discovery. Dunyazad's narrative explores the emotional landscape of women who are forced into roles of subordination, but who still find ways to assert themselves. She embodies a more introspective form of feminist consciousness, revealing the internal struggles many women face in a patriarchal world:

*"We are women. Our bodies are used, our lives written for us.
But I still wonder: what could we be if we could tell our own stories?"*

Throughout the novel, the female body is portrayed as a site of control and violence, but also as a place of resistance. Shahrazad's survival depends on navigating the threat of violence against her body, and she uses storytelling to reclaim some measure of control:

*"Every night, she told herself, her body would survive.
But her stories—they would thrive."*

This line highlights the feminist awareness of the body's vulnerability under patriarchal control, but also the belief that a woman's intellect and creativity can transcend physical limitations. While Shahrazad's body is threatened, her stories become a form of resistance, showing how women can use their intellect to challenge oppressive systems. In *When Dreams Travel*, the female body is a site of control, violence, and rebellion. The king's act of killing each wife after a single night together reflects the brutal objectification and dehumanization of women. The body becomes a symbol of male power and domination, but Hariharan also uses the female body to explore themes of resistance and autonomy.

Githa Hariharan has explored the brutal nature of the Sultan, who is consistently seduces the beautiful virgin girls for his sexual lust in every night and brutally evacuates them in the dawn. Through her creative and imaginative power, the novelist touches social pragmatics also based on feminism. Her perspective towards the subject is sensational and realistic both that explicates the character of Shahryar.

Thus, Githa Hariharan's endeavour is to highlight the women's exploitation in the post-colonial time was the burning issue but deliberately ignored, now it is uplifted and given voice by writing such fiction in the modern time. The novelist unfolds several facts through her

effective narration of the story, as Shahrzad eventually succeeds in her convincing and persuading the Sultan not to murder brutally all the virgins and redeems the ruthlessness and cruelty of him. As Githa Hariharan has stated in her own words:

“She must coax him to repent, and acknowledge that all women need not be killed. A Thousand and One Nights later it is all accomplished. When we part from them, the brothers are united with the sisters. The story ends on-stage. Off-stage it has just begun.”

Both *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* offer powerful critiques of patriarchy and portray the ways in which women resist oppression. However, their approaches to feminist resistance differ. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is grounded in the everyday realities of Indian women and explores subtle, internal forms of defiance against the weight of tradition. *When Dreams Travel*, with its mythical setting, emphasizes the power of storytelling as a direct and bold form of resistance, where women use their voices to challenge male authority and create their own narratives. In both novels, Hariharan’s feminist perspective shines through in her portrayal of women who navigate, resist, and ultimately seek to reclaim their agency in a world that seeks to silence them.

Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's books serve as examples of her feminist viewpoints, which aim to shatter the taboo of marginalized women's voices in tales. Through her fiction work, she has tried to investigate women's status and dignity in an effort to combat the centuries-old male dominance over women. By taking into consideration the conventional images and roles of mythological women, the author has successfully drawn a distinction between the lives of contemporary and post-modern women. The vast majority of Githa Hariharan's female storylines genuinely struggle for their self-worth, sense of self, and general well-being in order to attain equality, freedom, and kinship in today's world.

Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* offer profound insights into the complexities of women's experiences and their multifaceted struggles within patriarchal structures. Through her innovative narrative techniques, blending

myth, folklore, and realism, Hariharan crafts characters who resist, negotiate, and reimagine the boundaries imposed upon them.

These novels do more than critique societal norms; they reframe women's voices, giving agency to those often relegated to silence. The female protagonists in both novels grapple with autonomy, identity, and self-expression, reflecting broader struggles of women in contemporary and traditional Indian societies. By revisiting and rewriting familiar mythological and historical narratives, Hariharan challenges the ways in which women's roles have been constructed and seeks to reclaim space for their voices in both public and private spheres. Moreover, storytelling itself emerges as a powerful tool of resistance in Hariharan's works, not just as a means of personal expression but as a method of reshaping cultural memory and identity. Through her characters' journeys, Hariharan explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, freedom and constraint, silence and speech. Ultimately, her novels invite readers to see women's stories through a kaleidoscopic lens, where the diversity of experiences forms a rich tapestry of feminist consciousness.

This research has highlighted how Hariharan's contribution to feminist literary discourse extends beyond mere representation; her works actively participate in rewriting women's roles, questioning societal norms, and creating spaces of empowerment, reflection, and transformation for her female characters.

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