

Narratives from the Margins: Ethical Reflections on Discrimination and Exploitation in Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

Fiction has long served as a powerful and authentic mode of literary expression, adept at unveiling the vices, follies, and deeply entrenched inequities of human society. As an artistic mirror, it captures the multiplicity of social realities—both noble and grim—recognizing that good and evil inevitably coexist within the same cultural fabric. A truthful representation of the human world must therefore acknowledge every shade of experience, including those that appear unsettling or uncomfortable. Within such a framework, the condition of individuals belonging to marginalized communities becomes especially significant. To be situated at the margins is inherently disadvantageous, but when multiple axes of marginalization intersect—such as caste, gender, and economic deprivation in the case of a poor Dalit woman in India, or race, gender, and class in the case of a poor African-American woman in the United States—the burden becomes exponentially heavier.

Against this backdrop, the present research article delves into the complex social stratum of Indian society where women continue to endure silence, subjugation, and systemic oppression. It seeks to critically examine the lived realities of women whose suffering remains unregistered and unquestioned across generations, leaving them with little possibility of relief or emancipation. The study specifically focuses on Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, exploring how the narrative exposes the relentless cycle of exploitation imposed upon its protagonist, Mayamma. Through an analysis of three pivotal characters—Mayamma's mother-in-law, her husband, and her son—each representing successive generations of patriarchal authority, the article highlights the perpetuation of gendered violence and the absence of any transformative agency within the domestic sphere. By interrogating these intergenerational dynamics, the research underscores how literature functions not merely as a reflection of societal structures but also as a poignant witness to the enduring realities of discrimination and the silenced struggles of marginalized women.

Keywords

craftsmanship, art, oppression, exploitation, sensibility.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 12-12-25

Approved: 24-12-25

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Discrimination and Exploita-
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Notions July. - Dec. 2025,
Vol. XVI, No. 2,
Pg. 145-152
Article No. 19

Similarity Check: 03%

Online available at :
[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/notions-vol-xvi-no2-
july-dec-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xvi-no2-july-dec-2025)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
notions.2025v16i02.19](https://doi.org/10.31995/notions.2025v16i02.19)

INTRODUCTION

Portraying a true picture of society has, since time immemorial, remained the prime obligation of the artist. Literature functions as a polished mirror—reflecting, refracting, fixing, exposing, and ultimately reforming the follies and vices embedded in human civilization. No creative writer can fully justify his or her craft without engaging with this ethical impulse toward social illumination and transformation. One of the hallmarks of great art is its **permanence**, and such permanence is achieved when a work not only captures the texture of its contemporary society in authentic colours but also aspires to correct its distortions. This is why literary classics such as *Great Expectations*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *1984*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* have acquired timeless significance and universal resonance. Their enduring appeal springs from their ability to bring to the centre those who were historically pushed to the margins, and to interrogate systemic injustices with moral courage and artistic conviction.

Many practitioners of literary art, across cultures and epochs, have consciously resisted entrenched mechanisms of discrimination—whether social, political, racial, gender-based, or economic. Literature thus becomes a potent site for examining the processes of **marginalization**, **oppression**, and **exploitation**, all of which are rooted in deep-seated social constructs. These constructs—the rich oppressing the poor, the patriarch dominating the woman, the white subjugating the black—continue to shape human relations and ethical discourses. True literature cannot disregard such tensions; rather, it thrives on exposing them, questioning them, and compelling readers to confront those unsettling truths.

In the context of Indian English fiction, this ethical imperative attains particular urgency. Indian society, layered with caste, class, gender, religious, and regional disparities, provides fertile ground for narratives that challenge hegemonic structures. Since a meaningful work of fiction is expected to represent society in its multiplicity, its characters must emerge authentically from diverse social spheres. Githa Hariharan, an astute observer of everyday life and an author with keen moral imagination, deftly fulfils this responsibility. Her fiction not only portrays her characters with striking psychological depth but also ensures equitable representation of voices from various strata—elite, middle-class, subaltern, and dispossessed.

Hariharan's narrative universe is marked by her **prime sensibility** and **astute craftsmanship**, which enable her to construct a dynamic mosaic of characters, each pulsating with distinctive traits. Readers find themselves gliding effortlessly through her fictional worlds, carried forward by the vitality of her storytelling and the emotional power of her character portrayals. Her ability to capture the cadences of

ordinary lives—especially women’s lives—speaks to her profound understanding of human behaviour, social customs, and entrenched hierarchies.

Within this nexus of representation and resistance, the figure of **Mayamma** in *The Thousand Faces of Night* becomes a particularly compelling case. Her life narrativizes the cumulative weight of social oppression borne by a woman situated in India’s lower middle class. Hariharan traces how Mayamma becomes a victim of three generations of patriarchal and hierarchical authority—her mother-in-law, her husband, and finally, her son. Each of these relationships is shaped by specific social constructs that reinforce gendered servitude, silence, and erasure.

Mayamma’s mother-in-law in *The Thousand Faces of Night* embodies a recognisable social type through whom Githa Hariharan exposes a disturbing yet prevalent facet of patriarchal domestic life. She deserves primary attention in this analysis because Hariharan uses her with remarkable precision to illustrate how power, when vested in a woman within a rigid hierarchy, may translate into hostility toward another woman. In her hands, memories of her own suffering do not yield empathy; instead, they harden into instruments of cruelty. Through sharp dialogue and vivid description, Hariharan brings this figure to life with unsettling clarity.

Even before finalising the marriage proposal, the mother-in-law conducts a ruthless assessment of her would-be daughter-in-law. She interrogates Mayamma about the authenticity of her jewellery, even tugging at her gold plait “to make sure it was all real,” and demanding to know whether the ornaments were truly hers (Hariharan 80). Lacking access to Mayamma’s inner self, she falls back on an astrologer’s assurance that the girl will bear many sons. Once satisfied, she concentrates on extracting the maximum dowry.

Her frivolity and self-interest soon surface. By the end of the first year, Mayamma’s failure to conceive renders her, in her mother-in-law’s eyes, “useless and intolerable.” Fixated on producing a grandson, she condemns Mayamma to an unending cycle of vows and penance. She scrutinises the young woman’s body, complains that she “eats as much as anybody else, but is barren,” and declares that “her horoscope is a lie” unless she performs further rituals (ibid). Her cruelty escalates into shocking physical and psychological violence. Mayamma recounts moments when she was forced to smear burning spices on her body and was ordered to “cut the right [breast] open... and bathe the lingam” with her blood (113). Such grotesque acts reveal a worldview governed not by reason but by superstition, entitlement, and misogyny.

Food itself becomes an instrument of discipline: “No rice today, no vegetables tomorrow... Think of your empty, rotting womb and pray” (114). Her

displays of affection, such as requiring Mayamma to massage her ankles nightly before sending her late to her husband, remain hollow gestures masking deep-seated hypocrisy. She condemns Mayamma relentlessly while ignoring her son's debauchery, and overlooks her grandson's violence toward the same woman whose labour sustains the household. Hariharan captures this irony through Mayamma's quiet transformation from a bride resembling "Lakshmi" to a worn figure who has internalised her family's demands: tending fires before dawn and feeding "so many hungry mouths" (116).

The mother-in-law's irrationality peaks when she blames Mayamma for her husband's disappearance, calling her a curse upon the household. She even removes the family deity to her own room, convinced that years of Mayamma's prayer have "defiled it" (81). The eventual conception—after a decade of penance—only strengthens her delusion that her own punitive methods possess divine sanction. Mayamma recalls her mother-in-law "bustling around with purpose... her eyes filled with the power of her witch weapons" (122), performing rituals of revenge masked as protection.

In death, too, the older woman clings to her prejudices. Her final words accuse Mayamma of bringing ruin to the family, as though her own cruelty had no role in shaping the household's misfortunes. Through this character, Hariharan incisively portrays a segment of Indian womanhood shaped by superstition, internalised patriarchy, and the desire to exert control within the narrow spheres available to them. She exposes how women, acting from a place of inherited trauma and unexamined authority, can perpetuate cycles of oppression with a severity that matches—if not surpasses—their male counterparts.

Mayamma's husband in *The Thousand Faces of Night* stands as a stark representative of that stratum of irresponsible, insensitive, and morally frail men who populate the patriarchal landscape of Indian society. A husband, particularly in the early years of marriage, is expected to nurture, protect, and emotionally sustain his wife. Instead, this man becomes a grim accident of fate for Mayamma. Through his characterization, Hariharan exposes a disturbing reality: that many women in India find themselves bound to men who exploit rather than cherish them, and who remain insulated from legal scrutiny because their violence unfolds within the privacy of domestic walls. Victims, distanced from constitutional safeguards and social support, often choose silence over confrontation.

Though he ceremoniously takes the seven ritual steps with Mayamma, his motives are soon laid bare. His insistence that their "common path be lit by their lustrous love...so that (they) may bear a son" (80) reveals that procreation—specifically the birth of a male heir—is his primary expectation. His vows "to unite

their minds with the same thoughts”, and his address to Mayamma as “the lady of sweet-edged words” quickly dissolve into hollow rhetoric. Even in his youth, he shows signs of moral deterioration—bunking classes, gambling, and letting his gaze linger lasciviously on women “bent over their work” (80). Marriage does little to reform him.

Soon after the wedding, he begins frequenting the fields to satisfy his sexual urges, showing no concern for the drudgery and cruelty his mother inflicts upon Mayamma. Night after night she runs upstairs to an empty room, only for him to “sneak in towards dawn, satiated with his carnal night in the fields, and draw (her) to himself with rough tenderness” (118). Her marital life becomes a continuous cycle of coercion and fear: “He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow... If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with the other” (118).

The imagery with which Hariharan describes the sexual violence is deeply disturbing. The husband forces her to remove her nose-ring because it obstructs his pleasure, although he “pierced his own nose and ears” (110) on various parts of her body. He kicks her after returning from nights of whoring, insults her as a “shameless hussy” (111), and treats her body as an object to be conquered rather than a partner to be respected. As Dr. Prasanna Sree Sathupati observes, such narratives highlight “the amount of violence and rape women in Indian society are subjected to in the name of marriage” and the patriarchal belief that a woman is the property of her husband (Sathupati, 108).

Hariharan’s portrayal underscores that countless women remain trapped in marriages where rape becomes a recurring and normalized form of violence. As Indira poignantly states, such violence becomes “a conscious process of intimidation by which men keep all women in a state of fear” (Indira, 179). These women continue to “sacrifice and live a tortured humiliating life...bleeding within, seeking solace in the routine of life and religious worship” (ibid).

Mayamma’s situation illustrates a wider societal pattern in which a wife’s vulnerability is exacerbated by her economic and emotional dependence on her husband. The legal recognition of marital rape as a criminal offence, though a step forward, remains inadequate for countless lower- and middle-class women who lack the means or social support to seek justice. As Sathupati notes, “A woman has more cause to fear her husband than an assault by a stranger” (ibid, 108), for domestic violence often remains unrecorded and invisible.

Men like Mayamma’s husband continue to operate with impunity, sustained by social silence and systemic apathy. Unless society collectively challenges this

complicity, the exploitation of women like Mayamma will persist, concealed behind closed doors and perpetuated across generations.

Mayamma's son, Raja, though the long-awaited fruit of her intense penance, tragically turns out to be no different from his father. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Hariharan crafts Raja as a stark reminder of how patriarchal conditioning replicates itself across generations, despite a mother's sacrifice and devotion. As the narrative unfolds, we observe that Mayamma, in an effort to fulfill her mother-in-law's sole expectation—producing a male heir—embraces an austere life of ritual and deprivation. She wakes before dawn, bathes, worships, renews her vows daily, and survives on meagre scraps, for her mother-in-law finds no “use in feeding a barren woman” (Hariharan 112).

After ten long years of relentless prayers, fasts, and “silent and humble apology to an impatient mother-in-law,” destiny finally heeds her plea: Mayamma is blessed with a son “on an auspicious day” (ibid). Her ecstasy is unbounded—“the goddess blessed her womb” and at long last “the seed ripened” (122). Her breathless joy—“I couldn't walk, I had to skip, run”—captures the deep socio-cultural significance of motherhood in Indian society, where a woman's identity is often tied to her reproductive capacity. Rightly does Sudhir Kakar note: “motherhood, irrespective of class or caste, grants an Indian woman a purpose and an identity that nothing else in her culture can” (Fry 429).

Yet Hariharan uses Raja's character to destabilize such unquestioned assumptions: Does the birth of a son guarantee fulfilment and dignity for a woman? Raja's life becomes an unsettling commentary on the hollowness of the cultural belief that a male child brings redemption. Despite being cherished, named ‘Raja’ (king), breast-fed for two years, and shielded lovingly from every imagined evil eye, he “grows sour” (81) as he comes of age. The tenderness he receives, yields no moral growth. Instead, he inherits the entitlement, selfishness, and violence of his lineage.

By fourteen, Raja begins threatening Mayamma for money, then forcibly seizing her jewels. He sells her last pair of gold bangles, and on the night she refuses to give him her diamond earrings, he “hits her with an iron frying pan” (82). As she collapses on the cold cement floor with “a cloud of pain ... wet, sticky about her head,” she senses his hands “tearing away (her) earrings” (ibid). Hariharan powerfully juxtaposes the mother's decade of penance with the son's utter disregard for her sacrifices.

The irony is devastating: the child born after years of fasting, deprivation, and ritual humiliation—after being forced to “cut her breast open with the blade” and “bathe the lingam” (114)—becomes the very cause of her grief. Raja never pauses to consider the physical, emotional, and spiritual violence his mother endured

to bring him into the world. His mother's "slim waist," which once marked her as barren and unworthy of proper food, her horoscope dismissed as "a lie," and her coerced penance to "change its course" (80) remain invisible to him. Instead, like countless sons shaped by patriarchal privilege, he grows into a man who sees his mother not as a person but as a resource to be drained.

This portrayal forces readers to confront a troubling social paradox: **why do women like Mayamma undertake severe penance to bear sons who may ultimately become the agents of their suffering?** What cultural logic compels them to undergo deprivation—"no rice on Fridays, no vegetables the next day, and no tamarind the day after" ()—only to raise children who repay devotion with brutality? As Dr. Prasanna Sathupati observes, Indian women often "accept things with stoic silence repressing their agony without questioning the injustices inflicted upon them" (108). Mayamma epitomizes this tragic endurance.

The narrative further disrupts idealized constructions of motherhood through the harrowing account of Mayamma's miscarriage:

"Then the blood came...He (the village doctor) 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" (Hariharan 122).

The doctor's casual remark—"she is strong; she will bear many more children"(ibid)—exposes the chilling normalisation of women's suffering. In such a climate, it is unsurprising that sons like Raja grow up without empathy; society itself refuses to acknowledge the magnitude of a mother's sacrifice.

Hariharan thus uses Raja's character to indict a culture that glorifies sons but neglects mothers, celebrates male birth but overlooks maternal suffering, and sustains patriarchal norms across generations. Until society confronts this moral blindness, countless Mayammas will remain trapped in cycles of sacrifice, silence, and exploitation, and their hard-earned 'seeds'—born or unborn—will continue to be lost to insensitivity and indifference.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the trajectory of this research affirms that the lived experiences of women like Mayamma are not isolated tragedies but emblematic of the entrenched structures of oppression that continue to shape Indian society. Her story, marked by poverty, gendered expectations, and the stigma of infertility, illuminates the silent suffering of countless marginalized women whose voices remain unheard. While progressive legal reforms such as the recognition of marital rape represent significant milestones, their limited reach in rural and patriarchal contexts underscores the urgent need for structural transformation alongside legislative change. True justice

demands not only institutional accountability but also a collective societal awakening—one that dismantles inherited hierarchies and empowers younger generations to challenge inequality at its roots. By foregrounding suppressed narratives, literature assumes a crucial ethical role: it becomes both mirror and catalyst, reflecting the harsh realities of social injustice while inspiring moral responsibility and envisioning a more humane future where women are freed from cycles of silence and subjugation.

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