

From Submission to Revolt: Devi's Quest for Survival Beyond Patriarchy in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Dr. Pawan Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Post Graduate Government College

Punjab University, Chandigarh

Email: pawandr1911@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically examines the trajectory of Devi, the protagonist of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night, situating her journey from submission to revolt within the broader socio-political terrains of Indian society. Devi's life becomes a microcosm of the struggles faced by countless women who are unfortunately caught between tradition and modernity, silence and speech, and, the obedience and resistance. It has duly been examined how through a subtle use of 'satire' and 'irony' the novelist has deeply interrogated patriarchal institutions, particularly the oppressive structures of marriage, which often reduce women to passive participants in a system designed to curtail their individuality. My critical enquiry further strives to explore as to how, by exposing the hollowness of these institutions, the novel foregrounds the indispensable need for women to search for alternative modes of survival and self-expression. That the protagonist-heroine's revolt against the age-old shackles of patriarchy is not merely personal but emblematic of a larger feminist awakening in Indian English fiction; and her refusal to conform to the expectations imposed upon her, reflects a growing consciousness among women characters in contemporary literature, where voices once silenced begin to assert identity and autonomy, is one of the core issues I have delved around. Due attempt has been made to ascertain how Hariharan's narrative underscores the tension between inherited cultural values and the urgent demand for change, portraying the heroine's rebellion as both painful and liberating? The critical enquiry further dives deep to examine the fact that Devi's assertion of selfhood resonates with the collective feminist discourse that has increasingly shaped Indian English writing marking a shift from passive endurance to active resistance, thereby not only critiquing the structures that bind women but also celebrating the courage required to dismantle them offering a vision of empowerment that is both literary and political.

Keywords

Feminist, Survival, Submission, Revolt, Patriarchy

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Dr. Pawan Kumar

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Introduction

Indian English fiction has consistently provided a rich canvas for interrogating questions of identity, survival, and oppression, particularly through the lens of women's experiences. Writers such as Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Anita Desai have illuminated the unequal status of women, their suppressed voices, and the psychological landscapes of loneliness and alienation. Their works often highlight the silent endurance of women caught between tradition and modernity, exposing the fractures within familial and social structures. Yet, while these writers foreground the plight of women, Githa Hariharan introduces a sharper, more radical dimension to the discourse. Her dissatisfaction with the passive roles traditionally assigned to women leads her to question the sanctity of institutions such as 'patriarchy' and 'marriage', institutions long upheld as cornerstones of Indian society.

Hariharan's debut novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, is emblematic of this critical stance. The protagonist, Devi, embodies a refusal to conform to the expectations of submission and silence. Her journey is not simply a personal rebellion but a symbolic articulation of collective feminist resistance. Devi's revolt against marriage and patriarchal norms resonates with the broader socio-political realities of Indian society, where women continue to negotiate the tension between inherited traditions and the aspirations of modernity. By rejecting the role of the dutiful wife and daughter, Devi challenges the very structures that perpetuate female subjugation, thereby opening up possibilities for reimagining women's agency.

What makes Hariharan's intervention particularly significant is her insistence on portraying women as active agents of change rather than passive sufferers. Unlike earlier narratives that often depicted women's struggles in terms of endurance, Hariharan emphasizes confrontation, rupture, and transformation. Her fiction interrogates the cultural myths and social practices that bind women while simultaneously offering glimpses of liberation through acts of defiance. In this sense, Devi's journey becomes emblematic of a larger feminist awakening, one that insists on dismantling oppressive structures and reclaiming autonomy.

Submission and the Burden of Patriarchy

Extending a fertile ground for interrogating the intersections of identity and survival, Githa Hariharan questions the legitimacy of entrenched institutions viz 'patriarchy' and 'marriage' whereby, she carves out a robust heroine whose life-trajectory dramatizes the shift from submission to resistance, symbolizing a collective feminist struggle. Devi begins her journey as an obedient daughter and dutiful wife, embodying the expectations imposed upon women by patriarchal society. During the course of this journey, she, however finds the very institution 'Marriage' becoming

the site of her subjugation. Hariharan portrays Devi's compliance as symptomatic of a larger cultural ethos: "She had learnt to keep her voice low, her desires muted, her presence almost invisible" (p. 42). This depiction underscores how patriarchal ideology reduces women to passive sufferers, erasing their individuality and silencing their aspirations. Mahesh, Devi's husband, epitomizes this ideology when he, like so many other wishes, dismisses her intellectual pursuits: "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn't she a happier woman than you are? What is it you want?" (p. 74). Such statements shake us to question the entrenched belief that women's education and individuality are threats to marital harmony, exposing the deep-seated anxieties of a patriarchal order that fears female autonomy.

Hariharan's narrative, however, refuses to leave Devi in the realm of silence. Her eventual revolt against marriage and patriarchal expectations resonate with broader socio-political realities in Indian society, where women continue to negotiate between tradition and modernity. Devi's journey is not merely personal; it becomes emblematic of a larger feminist awakening that insists on dismantling oppressive structures. Unlike earlier narratives that often emphasized endurance and quiet suffering, Hariharan foregrounds confrontation and rupture. Devi's refusal to conform signals a reimagining of women's agency, challenging cultural myths and social practices that perpetuate subjugation.

Needless to emphasize *The Thousand Faces of Night* robustly contributes to the evolution of Indian English fiction from documenting women's marginalization to envisioning their empowerment. Hariharan's work insists that silence and submission cannot be women's destiny; resistance and self-assertion must be recognized as legitimate paths toward selfhood. By situating Devi's struggle within the continuum of feminist discourse, Hariharan underscores the urgency of rethinking gender roles in contemporary Indian society, affirming literature's role as a site of both critique and transformation.

Adding a sharper dimension, questioning the sanctity of institutions such as patriarchy and marriage, the novel foregrounds Devi's journey from submission to resistance, dramatizing the shift from passive endurance to active rebellion. Devi begins her trajectory as an obedient daughter and dutiful wife, embodying the expectations imposed upon women by patriarchal society. Marriage becomes the site of her subjugation, where compliance is demanded and individuality erased. His words reveal the entrenched belief that women's education and individuality are threats to marital harmony. Yet Devi's isolation is both physical and psychological. Her withdrawal from the marital space signifies the alienation women often

experience when denied individuality. Hariharan captures this alienation with striking imagery: "In the silence of her room, Devi felt the weight of centuries pressing upon her shoulders" (p. 87). This solitude, however, becomes transformative. It is within isolation that Devi begins to question the meaning of marriage and her role within it. Her monologues, punctuated with interrogatives, reveal her growing rebellion: "Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? ... A teasing bitch because I refuse my body when his hand reaches out?" (p. 74). These rhetorical questions mark her refusal to internalize patriarchal definitions of womanhood and signal her emergence as a resistant subject.

Hariharan's narrative thus moves beyond documenting women's marginalization to envisioning their empowerment. Devi's revolt against marriage and patriarchal expectations resonates with broader socio-political realities in Indian society, where women continue to negotiate between tradition and modernity. By situating Devi's struggle within the continuum of feminist discourse, Hariharan underscores the urgency of rethinking gender roles. *The Thousand Faces of Night* affirms that silence and submission cannot be women's destiny; resistance and self-assertion must be recognized as legitimate paths toward selfhood and collective emancipation.

Satire, Irony, and Sarcasm as Feminist Tools

Indian English fiction has often deployed narrative strategies to interrogate entrenched hierarchies, and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* exemplifies this through her use of satire, irony, and sarcasm as feminist tools. These rhetorical devices allow Hariharan not only to expose the violence embedded in patriarchal institutions but also to destabilize their supposed sanctity. Devi's reflections on marriage, for instance, are laced with biting sarcasm: "...this then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust" (p. 54). The sarcastic tone here dismantles the romanticized ideal of marriage, reducing it to a mechanical ritual devoid of intimacy or meaning. By stripping marriage of its cultural aura, Hariharan foregrounds its oppressive function in women's lives.

The imagery intensifies when Devi describes marriage as a sacrificial knife: "So this is all there is to. The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, and I see now that I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor..." (p. 54). This metaphor underscores the violence inherent in patriarchal institutions, where women are conditioned to embrace their own subjugation. The irony lies in Devi's recognition of how she had been taught to covet her tormentor, a realization that marks the beginning of her resistance. Through such ironic inversions, Hariharan

exposes the contradictions of a system that demands women's loyalty while simultaneously erasing their individuality.

Hariharan's use of irony extends beyond Devi's monologues to societal attitudes at large. The episode of Mayamma, who loses her child after years of longing, illustrates this. The village doctor's rebuke epitomizes patriarchal insensitivity: "A woman must learn to bear some pain...What can I do about the sins of your previous birth" (p. vii). The irony here is devastating—the woman's suffering is trivialized and attributed to karmic destiny, absolving patriarchal structures of responsibility. Such statements reveal the cultural mechanisms through which women's pain is normalized and dismissed, reinforcing their marginalization.

By weaving satire, irony, and sarcasm into her narrative, Hariharan not only critiques the oppressive realities of marriage and motherhood but also equips her female characters with discursive weapons to resist. Devi's sarcastic reflections and Mayamma's ironic plight collectively highlight the absurdity of patriarchal logic. In doing so, Hariharan situates her work within a broader feminist tradition that insists on exposing the hypocrisies of social institutions. *The Thousand Faces of Night* thus becomes more than a story of individual rebellion; it is a literary act of resistance that challenges the ideological foundations of patriarchy and affirms the necessity of feminist critique in Indian English fiction.

Revolt and the Search for Survival

Indian English fiction has often been a site for exploring women's struggles against oppressive structures, and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* dramatizes this through the theme of revolt and survival. Devi's eventual decision to walk out of marriage is framed not as an impulsive act but as an inevitable assertion of agency. Her rebellion is depicted as a necessary step toward reclaiming individuality and autonomy. As Hariharan notes: "To leave was to breathe again, to reclaim the self that had been buried under duty and obedience" (p. 123). This statement underscores the suffocating nature of patriarchal expectations and the liberating potential of resistance.

Devi's revolt is further symbolized through her mythological self-fashioning. She envisions herself as Durga, the destroyer of evil: "I lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger and cut off evil magical demons' heads" (p. 41). By aligning herself with Durga, Devi transcends the role of passive sufferer and embraces the identity of an active resister. This mythological identification not only empowers her but also situates her rebellion within a larger cultural framework, where female strength and agency are celebrated in myth even as they are suppressed in lived reality.

The novel thus presents revolt as both personal and collective. Devi's departure from marriage is not merely an act of individual survival but a symbolic gesture that resonates with the broader feminist struggle in Indian society. Her rebellion challenges the entrenched belief that women's destiny lies in submission and sacrifice. Instead, Hariharan portrays survival as contingent upon resistance, upon the refusal to accept patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Devi's journey illustrates how solitude, reflection, and mythological imagination can become transformative tools for reasserting agency.

Hariharan's narrative strategy emphasizes that survival in a patriarchal context requires more than endurance; it demands rupture and confrontation. Devi's revolt is framed as a reclamation of selfhood, a necessary break from oppressive structures that deny women individuality. By situating her protagonist's struggle within both contemporary socio-political realities and mythological traditions, Hariharan underscores the urgency of feminist resistance. *The Thousand Faces of Night* thereby contributes to the evolution of Indian English fiction from documenting women's marginalization to envisioning their empowerment, affirming that revolt is not only a path to survival but also a means of collective transformation.

Socio-Political Resonance

Indian English fiction has often reflected the socio-political realities of women's lives, and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* situates Devi's revolt within this broader feminist discourse. Her rejection of patriarchal norms challenges the sanctity of marriage and underscores the inadequacy of traditional institutions in addressing women's aspirations. As Urmila Varma observes: "Her pen, which is mightier than sword, attempts to establish a new order wherein she adopts satire as a mode of expression to give voice to her anger" (p. 104). This observation highlights Hariharan's narrative strategy of using irony and satire to dismantle patriarchal myths while simultaneously giving voice to suppressed female anger.

Devi's revolt resonates with the socio-political realities of Indian society, where isolation often accompanies resistance. Her decision to walk out of marriage is not framed as impulsive but as a necessary assertion of agency. The novel insists that freedom is not bestowed but must be carved out against centuries of oppression. This articulation situates Devi's struggle within a continuum of feminist resistance, where the pursuit of autonomy is fraught with solitude and alienation, yet remains indispensable for survival.

Hariharan's narrative also underscores the paradox of resistance in patriarchal contexts. While revolt promises liberation, it simultaneously entails estrangement from

familial and social networks that define women's identities. Devi's isolation, therefore, becomes emblematic of the costs of resistance, reflecting the socio-political reality that women who challenge norms often face marginalization. Yet, this solitude is also transformative, enabling Devi to reimagine herself beyond the confines of tradition. Her rebellion thus becomes symbolic of a collective feminist awakening, one that insists on dismantling oppressive structures and reconfiguring gender roles.

By situating Devi's personal struggle within the larger socio-political discourse, Hariharan affirms the role of literature as a site of feminist critique and transformation. *The Thousand Faces of Night* evolves beyond documenting women's marginalization to envisioning their empowerment, insisting that revolt is both a path to survival and a means of collective transformation. In this way, Hariharan contributes to the dynamic tradition of Indian English fiction, where women's voices challenge entrenched hierarchies and articulate new possibilities for freedom and selfhood.

Conclusion

The conclusion of *The Thousand Faces of Night* underscores the feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression by tracing Devi's journey from submission to revolt. Her trajectory exemplifies how isolation, though painful, becomes the crucible of transformation, enabling her to seek alternative modes of survival. Hariharan's narrative challenges the sanctity of marriage as an unquestioned institution, foregrounding instead the necessity of resistance in the pursuit of identity and autonomy. In this sense, Devi's departure from marriage is not merely a personal act but a symbolic assertion of agency against centuries of cultural conditioning.

Hariharan's use of satire, irony, and sarcasm further strengthens this critique. By dismantling patriarchal myths through sharp rhetorical strategies, she empowers her heroine to carve out a new identity. Devi's sarcastic reflections on marriage and her mythological self-fashioning as Durga highlight the absurdity of patriarchal expectations while simultaneously affirming the possibility of female strength. Her revolt, therefore, is not framed as impulsive rebellion but as a deliberate act of survival, a reclamation of selfhood buried under duty and obedience.

The socio-political resonance of Devi's struggle situates her narrative within the broader feminist discourse in India. The articulation emphasizes that autonomy must be wrested from oppressive structures, even at the cost of solitude. Ultimately, Devi's revolt is emblematic of a collective feminist awakening in Indian English fiction, affirming literature's role as a site of critique, resistance, and transformation. The novel thus becomes a site of contestation, where the protagonist's journey from submission to revolt mirrors the broader struggles of Indian women negotiating agency in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. As Devi's assertion of

selfhood resonates with the collective feminist discourse that has increasingly shaped Indian English writing, marking a shift from passive endurance to active resistance, Hariharan's work, it goes without saying, not only critiques the structures that bind women but also celebrates the courage required to dismantle them, offering a vision of empowerment that is both literary and political. By situating Devi's struggle within the continuum of feminist discourse, she underscores the urgency of rethinking gender roles in contemporary Indian society. Her work, therefore, contributes to a dynamic literary tradition that refuses to accept silence and submission as women's destiny, instead affirming resistance as a path toward selfhood and collective emancipation.

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