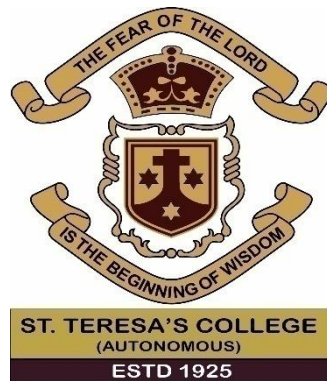


**EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIALIST ANGST IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S  
*THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT***



*Project submitted to St Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of  
the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in  
English Language and Literature*

*By*

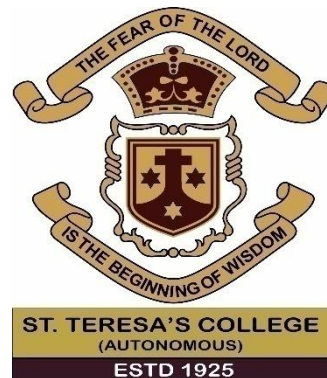
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**March 2019**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Exploring the Existentialist Angst in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Tessa Fani Jose, Lecturer-in-charge, Department of English.

Ernakulam

March 2019

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## **CERTIFICATE**

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Exploring the Existentialist Angst in Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*” by Vinitha John is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam

March 2019

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Vinitha John

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## Introduction

Existentialism is a broad philosophical theory of twentieth century which defines the true meaning of human existence. Popularized by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, it describes the concept of self and individual freedom. This theory is concerned about the subjective interpretation of the notion of self and its identity. It brings in the idea of individual freedom, choices, subjectivity and self. It explores people's journey from being a part of society to a true self. It questions the individual's capability to make their choices and decisions based on their experience, opinion and belief. The individual choices become distinctive from the objective values and norms provided by the society. The theory attempts to explain individuals irrespective of their predetermined 'essences'. It focuses on the concept of alienation, authenticity and freedom of choice.

As a philosophical theory, Existentialism was established by the "Father of Existentialism" Soren Kierkegaard in nineteenth century. This philosophical movement gradually developed into a revolt against rationality, reason and the patriarchal methods in which man was portrayed. Man's denial of conventional ethics, reason and his search for a subjective self became the central concerns of that age. Existential themes like freedom of choice, alienation, individual experience and quest for existence were also reflected in the writings of some of the exponents of Existentialism. Postcolonial Indian Existential writings came to existence around mid-twentieth century as a method for deconstructing the concretized concepts of power and oppression that were prevalent during the time of colonization. Postcolonial Indian writing focuses on the ideas of self-identity and cultural belonging.

Existentialism has been a unique focus among the twentieth century Indian writers. Some of them were renowned in sharing their existential thoughts through their works. R K Narayan was one of the early postcolonial Indian writers who explored the themes of

existentialism in his works. His novels that deal with the concept of alienation like *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1939), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) investigate the possibility of man to choose using freedom and make their lives joyful and meaningful. Anita Desai is another postcolonial Indian writer who portrayed existential angst through her works like *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri also explores existential themes like alienation, loneliness and despair in a subtle way. Arun Joshi is one of the first and finest Indian writers introduced the existential concepts through his novels. His novels like *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990) deal with the crisis of identity and existential dilemma in the present day world. Almost all the postcolonial existentialists exhibit a concern with the crisis of man, his existence, individuality, freedom of choice and responsibility. They are very much aware about the problems of identity and individuality in the modern world.

Existentialism has been one of the prominent themes in the postcolonial Indian writings. Such writings were to bring into light the need for a true sense of self and to break all the existing out-of-date conventional practices of society. These writings were to create in people a strong urge to identify their self and to proclaim their existence.

The Indian author Githa Hariharan is a renowned novelist who had penned numerous novels of existential relevance. She through her works, marks high success in the field of fiction which explores the plight of women under patriarchy, tradition and customs. Her debut novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* bagged the most acclaimed Commonwealth Writers Prize for the year 1993 as the best first novel. Following that she published a story collection *The Art of Dying* (1993), *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). Githa is also the editor of A



*Southern Harvest* (1993) and *Sorry, Best Friend!* (1997). Githa Hariharan is a fabricator of stories mingled with myths, fables and legends with some retelling and twisting. Her woman characters are often found in rebellion against considering marriage and motherhood as the supreme task of an ideal woman. Githa by portraying women characters who are self-actualizing and independent builds role models for the others. She has always been successful in loudly presenting the voices of the suppressed Indian women through her works.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* penned by Githa Hariharan is a tale about three generations of woman- Devi, Sita and Mayamma. In the novel, Devi returns to Madras with her American degree only to be the victim of her mother Sita's well-made plan of marriage or 'swayamvara'. Sita being a dutiful daughter, dutiful mother and a dutiful daughter-in-law all through her life tries to mould her daughter to be like her. Devi is also greatly influenced by her grandmother who narrates her mythical stories that are intended to shape her further in order to make her fit into a suitable marriage. She gets married to Mahesh, a dominant egoistic husband who treats her merely as a homemaker. She further learns the vital duties of an Indian wife from Mayamma, the old caretaker at Mahesh's house, who got married to a drunken husband when she was only a girl and abused by her mother-in-law. Devi later elopes with her lover Gopal. But after not being able to find her true self with Gopal she returns to her mother Sita to start a fresh new life. The novel explores the rough journey of all the three characters in quest for identity. It portrays the character's extreme urge for existence.

The project intends to explore the Existential elements in Githa Hariharan's postcolonial novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Existentialism is a philosophical theory which describes a man's journey to his own self. This project analyses the quest of the three prominent characters- Devi, Sita and Mayamma- for existence and identity. It identifies the situations that challenges their existence and traces their journey to individuality.

The first chapter titled, “A Brief Introduction to Existential Thought” traces the evolution of the theory of Existentialism, the major exponents of the theory and its few themes. The second chapter titled “Understanding the Ideas of Identity” explores how Githa Hariharan portrays few existential themes such as freedom of choice, alienation, existence precedes essence, authenticity and in authenticity through the three major characters’ quest for identity. The third chapter titled “Re-visioning of Myths in *The Thousand Faces of Night*” discusses how the myths narrated in the novel are perceived and reinterpreted. It also analyses how these myths help to find one’s sense of self.

## Chapter 1

### A Brief Introduction to Existential Thought

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which is concerned with man's struggle for existence. Existential philosophers appear to be dominated by the question of existence of man in the universe. It is concerned with freedom, guilt, anxiety, responsibility, despair, alienation and quest for meaning of life. This movement suggests a set of underlying themes and characteristics for human existence. Existentialism is a heterogeneous cluster of philosophical ideas that provides an account of agony of being in the world. This theory interprets human existence in the world.

*American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* defines Existentialism as a “philosophy that emphasize the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of ones' acts”. Existential philosophy believes that existence is specific and distinct. It focuses on the issue of human existence and investigates the meaning of being. Etymologically, the term ‘Existentialism’ is formed by adding the suffix ‘ism’ to the word ‘existential’. The term ‘existence’ according to the *Oxford Dictionary* means a ‘state of living’. But for existential philosophers the term refers not to a ‘state of living’ but to an ‘act of living’. Existence is a fact or a reality than a possibility.

Philosophers and saints from the ancient times have been facing the problems of existence and identity. A wide variety of ideas and themes on Existentialism can be identified from ancient times. The roots of Existentialism can be traced in Socrates dictum ‘know thyself’. According to Socrates it is not possible for a man to live a life successfully without properly discovering oneself. Socrates ideas on existence cannot be considered as proper Existentialism as it does not contain any existential character.

Existentialism began in the mid nineteenth century but became widely popular in the twentieth century, immediately after World War II. Even though Existentialism got great popularity after the World War II, it was immensely used by philosophers and thinkers like Nicola Abbagaano, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. The French philosopher Blaise Parcel can be considered one of the first to create a philosophical book 'Pensces' that conveyed his existential ideas in seventeenth century. The waves of Existentialism after World War II influenced intellectual thoughts of humans around the world.

According to Jean Paul Sartre "... by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" (10). Walter Kaufmann, in his book *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* says, "Existentialism is a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past; but it is only in recent times that it has hardened into sustained protest and preoccupation" (12).

Some of the thinkers of Existentialism are Soren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel. They are the philosophers who have contributed immensely to the Existentialist movement.

Soren Kierkegaard is considered as the father of existential philosophy. He saw the philosophy as an expression that is free from illusion and which explores the individual existence. Kierkegaard examined human condition as a condition of anxiety and despair. In his earliest work *Either/Or* he defines two "existence spheres" called 'aesthetic' and 'ethical'. Aesthetic sphere is a stage where an individual lives as an 'individual' committing him selves only to subjects from which he could derive pleasure. Whereas ethical sphere is a stage where an individual identifies himself as intimately tied to others.

Friedrich William Nietzsche is a fundamental German philosopher who had contributed to the existential theory like Kierkegaard. He believes in the subjectivity of human experience. In his first work *The Birth of Tragedy* which explores his views on existentialism he explains the importance of a complete acceptance of life and self-expression. He also supports the 'role of making free choice' and focuses on the deviation used by man to overcome in their struggle with the meaninglessness of life.

Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre is one of the most important figures in the development of Existentialism theory. Sartre's early work *Nausea* and *Existentialism and Humanism* focuses on the themes of existentialism and freedom. According to Sartre, "existence precedes essence" (5). He believes that individual exists before their essence and there is no god to propose certain fixed designs on human beings (6). He defines how human beings use freedom to make choices that define their 'essence' and to act as they choose.

Gabriel Marcel is another philosopher who had contributed to the development of the school of Existentialism. He coined the term 'Existentialism' in his essay *Existence and Objectivity*. Two important characteristics of Marcel's philosophy are his distinctions between primary and secondary thinking and between 'having' and 'being'. According to Marcel, personal existence is a reality that can be confirmed and tested by reflection and showed to other (Blackham 84).

Existentialism is always individual. It is the search for the meaning of being. It is concerned with the question of self. Through Existentialism we ask who we are. It focuses on one's identity. The existentialists in the modern era, place individuals in a place where he feels the loss of his identity. He may feel alienated, distanced and isolated. He may also suffer anxiety, dread, loneliness and anger. Freedom is an important element in Existentialism. According to the theory, an individual is free to take his decisions and would be considered responsible for the consequences of his decisions. It give the individuals

freedom to make their choices. In *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Earnshaw Steven says

It concerns are fundamental and immediate to ourselves- Who am I? What am I? What lie shall I live? How shall I live it? –and by ‘adopting’ this attitude there is an inherent sense of dynamism, of process, journey, discovery, enlightenment and revelation that is felt and believed to be more important than the building of self-contained, all-encompassing systems more usual to philosophical endeavor. (1-2)

Existentialism explores the questions like ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What am I?’. It is concerned with the individual’s personal identity. It identifies a subjective individual. Fernando Molina explains Existentialism in his book *Existentialism as Philosophy* as “...type of philosophizing which endeavors to analyze the basic structure of existence and to call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom” (2).

Existentialism is considered as a revolt against the existing traditional beliefs of the early philosophers. It dismisses the early concept that ‘essence precedes existence’. Existentialism is concerned with individuality, freedom, existence and identity of an individual. It is all about who we are and what we are. Unlike earlier philosophers, the point of concern of the existential philosophers is one’s identity which is defined before one’s ‘essence’.

It is important to know few themes of Existentialism in order to understand the philosophy of Existentialism. Some of the themes are, ‘existence precedes essence’, alienation, freedom of choice, authenticity and in authenticity. ‘Existence precedes essence’ is the fundamental concept of Jean Paul Sartre. It dismisses the view that humans are created by god with specific purpose in his mind. Sartre calls this purpose ‘essence’. He rejects the idea of ‘essence’ existing before one’s existence. According to Sartre, existence of human

beings precedes their essence (5). They are self-defined beings. What human being is, is the outcome of his choice (7). Existence is considered as a process through which a human being explores his 'essence'. It is an attempt to destroy the pre-established concepts of human existence. According to Sartre,

man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, and he himself will have made what he will be...Man is nothing else but what he make of himself. (28)

Existentialism focuses on the concept of alienation and attempts to liberate individuals from this estrangement. By exploring one's self individual overcomes alienation which is the result of society's demands on him.

Existentialism identifies two concepts- good faith and bad faith. Authenticity or good faith means being true to one's own self. It is living one's life with freedom, happiness and meaning. Human beings live an authentic life when they dismiss their social roles and accept themselves as the creator of their own life. The term 'authenticity' was first used by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Whereas in authenticity or bad faith is the result of one's acceptance of social roles and social responsibilities. In bad faith individuals' actions are controlled by external factors. This may lead to an unpleasant way of living.

Freedom of choice is one of the basic characteristics of Existentialism. It refers to the ability to make one's own choices and to live life according to the chosen values and commitments. It is the capacity to gain what an individual desires. Existentialism provides individuals the freedom to shape their individuality. Socially accepted values, norms and customs must be denied in order to embrace one's own individual choice. Sartre's words that 'Man is Condemned to Be Free' from his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* supports the

concept of 'freedom of choice' (28). Existentialism also makes the individual responsible for the consequences that his choices make.

Existentialism is therefore a philosophical movement that upholds the view that there is no specific meaning in the universe except the one given by the individuals. It is a theory that defines the individuality and identity of individuals. It provides individuals with freedom to define their own meaning of life and existence. Existentialism is a theory that shapes one's identity.



## Chapter 2

### Understanding the Ideas of Identity

The project attempts to analyze the book *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan from an existential perspective and understand the ways in which women characters in the novel struggle for their identity throughout the story. The novel *The Thousand faces of Night* is an exquisitely woven tale of four women –Devi, her mother Sita, her grandmother and her old maid servant Mayamma. Githa weaves this story with a saga of myths to make the readers familiarize with the smell, taste and color of her postcolonial life. The prime concept of this novel is the search for self. It narrates the bitter journey of many women of varying ages towards self-realization. This search for self, help them to attain reconciliation. The title of the novel is symbolic of the multitude of faces and masks that each woman characters in the novel had to wear in their journey for identity which is scarred by self- sacrifice and sufferings.

The concept of Existentialism is visible in the lives of all the three major characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The protagonist Devi is from a high class Brahmin family who goes to America to pursue her education. It is where her quest for self begins. In America she finds herself free from the values and expectation of “myth-laden” world. She says “But in America you could brazenly plead your rights as an individual” (Hariharan 6). Devi could identify herself as an individual while she was in America. She always wanted to “shed her inhibitions, her burden of Indianess” that always pulled her back “and merge with these oases of colour and spontaneity which relieved the monotony of an anaesthetized suburbia” (4). The dream that Devi saw on her last night in America with her boyfriend Dan suggests her inner thirst for identity. She dreamt herself kicking the desperate hands that clung to her legs and swimming as she had never swum before. According to Githa she runs out of the water like an ‘uncompromising survivor’. Also in this chapter Devi tries to figure her suppressed

inner voice about her identity when she says “Or some dim memory of an appointment, a quest?” (Hariharan 9). Her real struggle for identity or existence begins when she goes to her motherland India from America. For Devi her individual life with all the freedom in America is over and is now only a dream. It is beautifully expressed by Githa when he says

As she ran up to the waiting plane, she felt her American years slip away from her shoulders and trip her up in dank, stagnant puddle around her feet. The brief dream was over. She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet halfway, naked and vulnerable, her home-coming. (11)

The novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* bears a lot of instances where there is a denial of one’s ‘authenticity’. Devi who returns from America is forced to act according to her mother Sita’s carefully laid plans. Without asking Devi’s wishes and desires she is introduced into a ‘swayamvara’ by her mother. She is made to wear a silk saree since it is considered as an acceptable dress for a bride- to-be. In doing this her family tries to shape her into accepted or desired way of society. In the novel Devi is constantly made to move according to the established social values. She is demanded to be a fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to adjust kind of a bride by Srinivasans.

Devi’s grandmother also plays a relevant role in molding her thoughts about marriage and womanhood. The picture that Devi painted in her mind about her marriage listening to her grandmother’s mythical stories was not less than a fairytale. Devi says

In my grandmother’s stories, there was room only for heroes and heroines. Princesses grew up secure in the knowledge of what awaited them: love, a prince who was never short of noble, and a happy ending... ‘You too will live like a princess’ she would say fondly... my seven-year-old mind thrilling at the splendors that awaited me. (Hariharan 20)

Being guided by her grandmother's stories she always dreamt of a god-like hero who always holds her hands gently when he saw her own desperate desire to fly with him. But her marriage with Mahesh lacked the colour and excitement she dreamt of. Mahesh was "no prince, but a regional manager in a multinational company that makes detergents and toothpaste" (22). The dreams that she had about her husband were soon shattered. Mahesh was a very busy person who was always in his business trips. When Mahesh leaves for his monthly tour, she feels herself as a child whose summer holiday had slipped away from her when she was not looking. She feels alienated being alone in that big mansion on Jacaranda Road. Degradation of Devi's identity living alone is clearly visible when she says "More than a year has crawled by, only my world whirls in smaller and smaller circles, the centre-point the jacaranda-surrounded ancestral house" (53). Being alienated in her own home she desires to overcome this by pursuing her career. But Mahesh denies her freedom of choice by asking her to help Mayamma in household duties. Also by discouraging her wish to learn Sanskrit Mahesh rejects her the wisdom which was only the right of a Brahmin man. For Mahesh a woman is no more than a wife or a home maker. He expects from her the bare minimal. He tries to entrust on her the identity of only a homemaker. He shows his male dominancy by suppressing her thirst for identity. Here Devi is denied the freedom of choice to live her life according to her own chosen commitments.

Devi experience alienation when her baba dies. It was only by Baba's stories Devi felt engaged in the huge mansion when her husband was away busy in trips. According to Devi, "his stories are for a woman who has already reached the goal (womanhood) that will determine the guise her virtue will wear... They always have for their centre-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife" (Hariharan 51). His stories about Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Jayadeva, Purandara Dasa and Narayana Tirtha echoes male dominancy. According to Baba, "the path a woman must walk to heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The

woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vows, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in heavens” (55). And after Baba’s death she felt herself as a “wooden puppy” in Mahesh’s hands. The bare minimal role which Mahesh expects from her reduces her to a mere puppet. She says “I stand by him, a silent wife, my wet sari clinging to me like a parasite, my hair streaming wetly down my back” (83-84).

The harsh experience that Devi undergoes in the hospital is another instance of her alienation. Devi says “Mahesh has found a doctor, the best of course, who will set right, with sterilized instruments, the rebellious organ, the straying tubes inside me. I will leave the clinic with my parts glued together, whole, mended, an efficient receptacle for motherhood” (89). Devi’s identity as a woman gets repaired and mended in order to be a mother. Mahesh’s desire to replant Devi’s identity from a wife to a mother makes Devi furthermore alienated.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* there are instances where Devi’s identity gets pre-defined by patriarchy. Baba’s words about how a wife should be are a good example. He says “The housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word, and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does” (Hariharan 71). Mahesh’s question to Devi asking “did your mother need a book to tell her how to be a wife?” (71) is yet another instance where “essence precedes existence”. Throughout the novel the patriarchy tries to teach Devi the roles and identities she had to practice. It also tries to prepare her about how to conduct herself in those prescribed identities. According to Sartre “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards”(345).

Devi’s struggle for existence can be identified with the other woman characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Sita, Devi’s mother had faced a similar scenario in her marital life. Sita according to her mother-in-law “had been trained as a daughter-in-law...and she played the veena every day after she had finished her household duties” (Hariharan 30). But she had

to sacrifice her passion for veena in order to become a “dutiful daughter-in-law and a wife”. According to Devi’s grandmother, Sita’s sacrifice was an act of penance that made her resemble Gandhari who embraced destiny by covering her eyes using a piece of cloth. This shows how woman’s identity circle around the question ‘Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?’. Sita in the novel shows a strong adherence to social norms. She shapes her daughter Devi in order to fit her into a marriage system ignoring her desires and wishes. Sita also possesses a controlling power upon Devi. She cares her as she cares her young jasmine creeper. Githa says

Sita would start the new shoots off in the right direction, well before the possibility of any rebellion. Then she would check every day to see that it grew almost horizontally: a difficult, painstaking job, since the natural growth of the plant is upward. The tender, clinging young creeper, so eager to be led in right direction, so rewarding or a trainer, reminded Sita of Devi. (Hariharan 98-99)

In patriarchal world women’s “identity is defined in context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care” (Gilligan 18). Devi quotes

In her ruthless attempts to keep these at bay, Sita had built a wall of reticence around herself. This was not a wall that excluded the mundane, trivial or ugly. It distanced her from the ambiguous and anchored her firmly to the worldly indices she had adopted in place of the veena. (Hariharan 136)

Mayamma is yet another woman character in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* who travels the rough journey in the quest for identity. She is an old caretaker of Mahesh’s house and “a dried-up house lizard too harmless to be repulsive” (62) according to Devi. Mayamma was also a victim of unsuccessful marriage. She got married to a gambler at the early age of twelve. She says “I put away the shells, the smooth, the round pebbles I had

played with in my parents' home. I took into my hands the iron skillet and blew the fire into stove even before my mother-in-law woke up" (116). She was rebuked and ill-treated by her mother-in-law for her 'barren womb'. She forces Mayamma to do cruel penances. Mayamma once said "She pulled up my sari roughly, just as her son did every night, and smeared the burning red, freshly-grounded spices into my barrenness" (113). For her penance was to her like a 'grey-haired school teacher' or 'an old friend'. Here, Mayamma is completely denied of the freedom as an individual. Her motherhood is treated as her only identity. Mayamma epitomizes those women who embrace their precious social values, silently suffering all the injustice and never rebel. Here by nurturing 'bad faith' Mayamma is trying to escape the responsibility of "freedom of choice".

The change of the women characters in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* from a passive struggler to an active fighter begins with the protagonist Devi. Her journey marks a search for identity, destroying all the social commitments and norms with which she was tied. Devi's fight begins with the realization of the fact that she cannot conceive. She uses this as a powerful tool to take revenge against Mahesh. She says, "You (Mahesh) have trampled on your marital vows... For that you will be let alone, without wife or child" (Hariharan 95). And she decides to go on her 'first real journey' soaring high on the crest of her boyfriend, Gopal's wave of ragas in search for identity. Identifying the truth that her place as mistress in Gopal's house is not any different from her place as a wife in Mahesh's house she decides to escape and search the freedom of self. The reflection of Gopal's sleeping face on the mirror makes her realize her dependence on other for her identity.

Devi undraped the sari and folded it carefully, lovingly, till it was one long, multi-layered curtain. She covered the mirror with the silk so that the room suddenly became darker, and everything, the bed, the table, the sleeping body of Gopal, were themselves again, no longer reflections. (138)

Mayamma also recognizes the deterioration of her identity being alone in the old house. Her resignation from her social roles and her quest to embrace fresh identity is expressed by Githa when she says “tomorrow, tomorrow, she (Mayamma) would plant some fresh new seeds in her garden” (124). Mayamma’s question that what happens if she tears off the shroud that envelope her sagging flesh, makes her share the story of her aunt Lakshmamma who in her old age “cast away the shame, the very source of her womanhood” (Hariharan 125) by sitting naked in front of her veranda in order to attain what she desired. Mayamma after recognizing her faults that she committed in her past by waiting and not rebelling against the injustice, advises Devi to go and “search for the forest you crave in your delirious youth. Go deep, deep, into its hollows, and into the mild terrors of its dark stretches... seek the river, miles away, where the dim forest gives way to a clear, transparent flood of light” (126). It was in her later part of life she recognizes the need of freedom and the essentiality of recognizing one’s self.

Sita also comes down from being a sacrificial daughter-in-law and dutiful Indian mother to self-examination. She embraces her once sacrificed love- her veena- and prepares to begin a new life with her daughter in complete awareness of her individuality. Githa says “ready for self-examination, she sat before the relic from her past, the broken veena, freshly dusted, and awaited for Devi to come back to her” (109).

The closing scene of the novel,

Suitcase in hand, Devi opened the gate and looked wonderingly at the garden, wild and over-grown, but lush in spite of its sand-choked roots. Then she quickened her footsteps as she heard a faint sounds of veena, hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house. (139)

proclaims a happy ending for the long rough journey of the women characters. They all reach a place where they can identify themselves as individuals free from all social values and

expectations. So, the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* explores the lives of three female characters- Devi, Sita and Mayamma, “who walked a tightrope and struggled for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves” (Hariharan 135).



## Chapter 3

### Re-visioning of Myths in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan retells the old patriarchal myths in a new feminine light. Myths depict the lives of men and women in their respective caste and religion. In the novel, Githa's narration is not about Bhima, Arjuna or Karna but it is about Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti. By narrating *Mahabharata* in a female point of view Githa gives a new angle to the old male dominated myths. The novel interrogates the male centered myths where "essence precedes existence" and revisions it in a woman centered light. The central character Devi reinterprets the mythical stories narrated by her grandmother in a way that enhances her quest for identity. She redraws the traditional picture of Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti to suit her fight for existence.

Devi's grandmother in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is the source of myths in the novel. Her stories were to provide a foundation for Devi's commencement into womanhood. Devi says "...through her I fell in love with the god-like heroes and heroines whose stories were as real, more real, to her than our own" (Hariharan 26). Devi's childhood was nurtured with the stories of mythical woman warriors who were the epitome of self-sacrifice and ambition. According to Devi these stories fashioned "ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors" (27).

Grandmother's narration of myths was to make Devi fit in the system of marriage. It was to teach Devi how her ancestors had followed the path of sacrifice and devotion in order to become an ideal woman. Her stories were to show how a dutiful wife should be and what makes an Indian woman a good Indian woman. Grandmother through the stories from *Mahabharata* tries to establish a bond between myths and lives of ordinary women. Her stories are intentioned to provide girls with fixed 'essence' that they must live up to in their

future. Story of Gandhari who “embraced her destiny- a blind husband- with self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood” (Hariharan 29) by tying a piece of cloth over her own eyes, was to teach what is it to be a real woman. It was to teach that woman meet her fate alone and all husband are noble. Also the story of the courageous Amba who found “means to transform her hatred, the fate that overtakes her, into triumph” (36) was to teach how a woman fights her battle alone and the idea that a woman without a husband has no home.

But Devi envisioned these myths and stories told by her grandmother with her own new interpretation. The morals that Devi drew from these legend stories were different from what her grandmother intentioned to provide. She saw Gandhari, Amba and all the other heroines in a fresh light. She responded to her grandmother’s stories with a story of her own. Devi says “It was impossible to hear her stories year after year, stories of a womanhood I would soon grow into, without insinuating myself on to that fantastic canvas” (40). She saw Gandhari’s sacrifice not as a resignation or as an acceptance of fate but as her anger tied as a bandage over her eyes. She says “.... Gandhari’s pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind sufferings, was no piece of fiction. Gandhari’s anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine” (29). Devi was also greatly impressed by the story of the woman avenger, Amba who earned manhood through her penance. She in order to take revenge against Bheeshma was reborn as Drupada’s daughter, “a daughter raised as a son”. Devi says “Amba’s story...made a deep impression on me, like an irresistible horror-film, and I day-dreamed more and more about female avengers” (Hariharan 40). Devi instead of embracing a *Mahabharata* that teaches self-sacrifice and selflessness, she embraces a *Mahabharata* that privileges non-conformism, resistance and rebellion. She uses these myths to reach her true identity.

Devi in the novel is not as the mythical goddess Devi. The great goddess Devi is a very firm woman who slaughtered all the demons but the Devi in the novel is a vulnerable woman. The only place where Devi exhibits firmness is when she escapes from her empty relationships with Dan, Mahesh and Gopal in search of identity. Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* tries to prove Sartre's concept 'existence precedes essence' through her retelling and re-visioning of myths. She rejects the predetermined 'essence' that teaches how a woman should embrace her destiny like Gandhari, by showcasing her own life. She retells the role of mythical heroines from meek and vulnerable to ambitious and courageous. Devi herself wants to be like the goddess Devi. She says "I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons' heads" (41). Githa treats the other woman character Sita not as the mythical character Sita from *Ramayana* but as a woman who is firm in her duties and responsibilities. Sita by not becoming her mythical equivalent from *Ramayana* that teaches norms and patriarchal values, fights her ordeals and defines her existence.

Githa Hariharan through the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* reverses the male centrism in the mythical stories of *Mahabharata* written by male writers by rewriting them in female point of view. By attempting this she tries to analyze how myths help Indian women in redefining their identity.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharanis "a *Mahabharata* of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims of ambitions, humility, arrogance and submission... Hers is the *Mahabharata* from the feministic perspective telling not of Karna, Arjuna or Bhima but of Gandhari and Amba" (Khan 135).

## Conclusion

*The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan is successful in its attempt to unveil a fresh angle to women's identity. It portrays the women characters in their search for self. The novel discusses the sufferings, alienation and struggles of its women characters. The three major characters in the novel can be found fighting the idea of an “ideal woman” that is demanded of them as good wives, daughter-in-law and mothers. Through the novel, Githa deconstructs the idea of freedom, equality and power established by patriarchy. Githa Hariharan’s concept of self and identity can be evidenced with the help of Existentialist school of thought. She rejects the pre-defined roles given by the patriarchy and discovers new roles for women based with a sense of true self.

All the three characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* were initially the victims of alienation, subordination and humiliation. They were objectified to certain pre-established roles which Sartre calls ‘essence’. But Githa erases these ‘essence’ and sets her women characters in search for existence.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* is fashioned with a saga of myths from *Mahabharata*. Githa articulates the pictures of women as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ with the aid of these mythical stories. She retells these myths in a female point of view and in a way that nourishes the character’s search for identity. Through the narration of these mythical stories, Githa also tries to reject the notion of “essence precedes existence”. She dismisses the necessity of such myths to define women’s role and reshapes them as a weapon in their journey of search for true self. Devi, the main protagonist in the novel reinterprets the established pictures of Gandhari, Amba and Damayanti to suit her quest for identity. With the use of mythical stories in the novel, Githa reaffirms the prime concept of Existential philosophy “existence precedes essence”.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan offers a perfect illustration of how a woman in a male centered society deals with subordination and alienation. She portrays her three women characters in constant denial of freedom of choice and expressions. Her characters are the sufferers of low self-respect and self-dignity. They are not identified as individuals but are identified with the roles they perform as wives, daughter-in-law and mothers. Githa through the novel asserts the need of a true self for woman. Thus the novel play a crucial role to make women's demands and desires known and heard in the male centered society.

Therefore Githa Hariharan in her novel represents women who try to establish their own identity. She has succeeded in transforming the image of woman from traditional, self-sacrificing to independent, self-defining. Her women characters free themselves from the pre-defined identities and explore the fresh paths towards self-discovery. Hence *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan can be celebrated as an Existential work as it explores the journey of three women of different generation in their quest for a true existence.

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