THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* shows how the haveli with its rigid ways allows for change and progress when an educated woman like Geeta handles it the right way. Though caught in the conflict between modern and traditional values, the protagonist at the end successfully synthesises the two attitudes – tradition and modernity – towards life. Though her freedom is curtailed, Geeta has never felt that her in-laws have been harsh towards her. She begins to appreciate the strength of the system which she had earlier found stifling. Through Geeta the novelist also shows that in order to be modern, one need not renounce one’s own cultural roots.

Like *Inside the Haveli*, Jai Nimbkar’s *A Joint Venture* also portrays the travails of a young, educated and modern woman who comes from a middle-class family. Like Geeta of *Inside the Haveli*, Jyoti of *A Joint Venture* also has the ability to think and feel, analyze and decide the course of her life. Geeta earlier finds the haveli very stifling but gradually learns to love and respect the ways of the haveli and decides to stay on and desires that her children must grow up there. But unlike Geeta, Jyoti decides to leave her husband’s house after twenty-five years of her married life, and goes on a holiday in search of her own identity. There she changes her mind and comes back, decides to play the role of his protector, which so far he had played for her. Like Rama
Mehta and Jai Nimbkar, Githa Hariharan also reveals gender inequality, woman’s search for personal identity, meaning of marriage and its effect on the Indian woman.

Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* portrays women as vulnerable individuals craving for love and understanding, while all the time being victims of their own gender. It is the struggle of Devi, a young woman, to cope and survive in the prison-house of an arranged marriage the constricting environment of which makes her feel trapped. Githa Hariharan highlights her experience by interspersing it with those of other women and thus the position of women entrapped in such male power structures is explored. Self-realization and self-knowledge help these women to either attain liberation or reconciliation. Devi’s own story is complimented by the stories of four other important women: her grand mother, her mother, her mother-in-law and her servant. All these women, each in her own way, have been both a victim and a survivor. Their lives have been scarred by suffering, sacrifice, injustice, and disappointment and yet they are undefeated, unbroken and strong. These women

… walked on the tight rope and struggled for some balance, for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves. They represent three generations, and more than thousand facets of women in India who still have no better existence than night. (Indira, 181)
In The Thousand Faces of Night, Avish Joseph states, “Hariharan traces the battle of Devi in her relationship with men and society, problems and inner tensions that a woman had to face in her life.” (129) It successfully juxtaposes and intermingles the lives of a foreign returned young girl, Devi, her artistically inclined mother, Sita and an old care-taker Mayamma. Devi goes to the U.S. on a scholarship to do a Master’s. There her black American friend Dan, proposes to her but she refuses his offer of marriage due to her ambivalence to American culture. She cannot take the plunge and cannot cut herself off from her ancient moorings. She is also aware that her enjoyment with Dan is “… necessarily dependent on her inability to conceive of a life with him.” (Hariharan, 6) So when marriage is suggested by him, she pretends to be shocked, to selfishly spare herself of guilt. She is highly insensitive in treating him as a fantasy object and plaything. The tug of the mother country and of her widowed mother drags her back into the stifling and stultifying world of the upper-class Tamil Brahmin Community in Madras. Unable to adjust with ambivalent American experience she returns to live with her mother. She reasons out for her return to India thus:

Amma’s letters brought with them an unspoken message of loneliness, poignant in its quiet dignity … But the image of her alone by the sea teased me like a magnet … That she might need me, my hesitant, self-doubting presence, was intoxicating (16).
Devi regards her mother very highly and also out of her true and keen love for her, she comes back to India. The special bond between Devi and her mother, and the mother’s dreams of a bright future for her daughter is something common in the Indian family system. Commenting on the psychological implications of mother-daughter identification, Sudir Kakar observes:

The special maternal affection reserved for daughters contrary to expectations derived from social and cultural prescriptions, is partly to be explained by the fact that a mother’s unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her so in her daughter the mother can re-experience herself as a cared-for girl. And, in Indian society … a daughter is considered a guest in her natal family, treated with the solicitous concern often accorded to welcome outsider, who, all too soon will marry and leave her mother for good. Mindful of her daughter’s developmental fate the mother re-experiences the emotional conflicts her own separation once aroused, and this in turn tends to increase her indulgence and solicitude towards her daughter. (61)

When Devi returns to Madras from America to live with her widowed mother, she confronts initially some difficulties in making adjustments with day-to-day realities. Though she has come from a brave new world, she realizes that it is difficult to change the old order with her radical ideas and her dream like visit to America ends as soon as she is in India. She and her mother are pulled together like a one
celled unit. “Sita becomes her anchor rock, never wrong, never to be questioned, a self evident fact of our existence.” (16) Though Devi lived in America for a few years, she still felt susceptible to her environment.

Devi is married to Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multinational company. She tries to fit herself in the role of a wife and daughter-in-law just as her mother did years ago. She has some expectations from her husband, Mahesh to support and understand her on emotional grounds but her expectations are never realized. She is impressed by his frankness when he talks about his expectation of marriage. But very soon she realizes that there were no heroines in his life, only wives and mothers. It hit her that if Dan is too un-Indian, Mahesh is too Indian. Her life in fact is ripe for disillusionment when she walks into an arranged marriage, at once alien and familiar. She has all along thrived on illusions of womanhood.

Also Devi’s study and stay abroad, make her, more or less, unsuited to the life that she leads in India. Devi fails to adjust herself thoroughly to a traditional life as she has been influenced by the modernistic ideas of the west. Within the social structure of the male oriented society, Devi cannot define her identity, as a wife under an arranged marriage, or even as a rebellious lover.
Devi’s husband, Mahesh, goes in long-tours for weeks together on business. More than his absence, it is his coldness that leaves Devi utterly dejected. Mahesh has everything a young lady can dream of — an executive job, a palatial house in Bangalore and enormous riches. She is provided with everything but she finds that something is lacking in her life. His cold and indifferent attitude irks her. Devi feels cheated and slighted. Devoid of the much needed emotional sustenance which, earlier, she used to draw from her mother, she feels that marriage is a torture and it hangs like a knife above her neck:

I am still a novice in the more subtle means of torture. I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck, and let the blood gush, …The games it plays with me are ignominious … The heart I have prepared so well for its demands remains untouched, unsought for. (54)

Devi hates being compelled to follow her husband’s “self contained footprints, with clumsy feet that stumble at sharp edges and curves.” (84) Ignoring her pleas, he entertains his friends by turning the house a place for parties and playing cards. He is inconsiderate towards her feelings and emotions, and this makes Devi think that her individual freedom is curtailed. Disappointment and anger mount in her. Her urge for a strong sense of revenge is manifested in many forms. She grows wild in her fantasies and seeks an escape in her weird imaginings: “I will grow a garden of weeds, those single minded, wild, common-
blooded weeds that plunge their tenacious roots deep, deep into the helpless soil.” (58) Devi’s marital life lacks the colour and excitement that she had expected. Her husband contrasts her with other women who are not so well educated but are more efficient and happier mainly to underline her deficiency and diminish her self esteem:” 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?” (74)

The satiric tone is quite obvious when Devi confesses about Mahesh’s attitude towards her; “He is far too civilized to raise his hand and bring it down on my rebellious body. He snarls instead about women’s neuroses and my faulty upbringing.” (74) And her rebellion comes out in monologues punctuated with interrogatives:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? … A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight? (74)

According to Mahesh, marriage is a necessity, a social obligation that has to be fulfilled and it is the wife’s duty to keep her husband happy by fulfilling his desires of the flesh. Mahesh fits into the description of De Beauvoir when she says that a man
views the bed as the proper terrain for asserting his aggressive superiority. He is eager to take and not to receive, not to exchange but to rob. He seeks to possess the woman to an extent over and above what she gives him; he demands that her consent be a defeat and that the words she murmurs be avowals he tears from her—demands that she confess her pleasure and recognize her subjection. (725)

At a crucial moment of introspection, Devi, reflects on her life as wife:

This then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in a lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood. (54)

Devi thinks that this situation has arisen because her education has not prepared her to play the role of a wife. According to Damodar Rao, “The areas of outward confrontation … are very few … Her mental stages rather than actual events occupy the centre stage and the conflicts, having been internalized, result in psychological aggression and violence.” (Rao, 168) Devi, being a romantic individual, is married to a very matter-of-fact type of young man, Mahesh, which is amply demonstrated by this statement, when his wife had asked a question, “Why did you marry me?” (54), his reply was, “Whatever people get married for … Thank God, we Indians are not obsessed with love.” (54-55) She is defenseless against Mahesh’s supreme confidence and superciliousness.
Mahesh seems to be insensitive to the possibility of Devi possessing an individuality and a personality that needs to express itself in a role away from that of a wife. When Devi wants to apply for the post of a research assistant, he discourages her. “What can you do? Mahesh asked, like a ruthless interviewer stripping away the inessential … You need at least one more degree for that, he said. And what will you do when the baby comes?” (64-65).

Mahesh’s self-complacence receives a blow when the after fatherhood eludes him. To him, Devi does not seem to crave for motherhood. When he awaits news of her pregnancy, her repeated nonchalant response is, “no news”. She remains “… all bones and flat stomach.” (86) The fact that he is fine and she is the one to consult a gynecologist does not help his ego. A woman without child becomes utterly powerless and can be used to tilt the scales of power. It is the ‘why’ that helps Devi restore her self-esteem. A woman is always looked down in an Indian society, if she does not bear children for a long time. Motherhood is considered a heavenly gift and gives a purpose and identity to her life and to her family, and thus is a redemptive factor on the part of a woman in India. Devi’s mother writes about the importance of motherhood:
All through the ages, my dear Devi … women have sought the deep content that comes with motherhood. When I held you helpless in my protecting arms, when you first smiled at my face bent over yours, when you lisped that precious word Amma, what vistas of joy opened up before me! (86)

Devi believes that the children at least would keep her engaged, wilderness at bay: “Perhaps I will raise a brood of joyous, wild children, who will run pell-mell in this quite garden …They will indulge my fantasies of childhood …” (53)

Devi, however, is least perturbed by her inability to conceive. Once the novelty of the marriage wanes, she becomes restless. Mahesh’s insensitive attitude makes her realize the trap she is in. When he tries to establish his unquestionable authority over her, she repels. She even derives satisfaction in not being able to carry children for Mahesh. She considers it a powerful weapon to be hurled against him. Childlessness, she feels, is the price she has to pay as penance for her marriage with Mahesh.

Devi finds a route for rebellion when Mahesh says, “I want you to have my baby.” (74) The rejection of his sperm is the unconscious but important step to the assertion of her self. He may possess her body but cannot direct and control the functions of it. Her failure to become a mother becomes a crucial factor in her development as an individual.
Self realization dawns on her and Mahesh, the chauvinist is mainly responsible for this. She liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play to attain a state of free and creative individuality.

Baba, Devi’s father-in-law, resembles Manu in his attitude towards women. His stories of saints and their wives uphold the traditional Hindu concept of Dharma. He invests so much confidence in woman and thereby assigns a great deal of responsibility to her. He says in a hypnotic voice:

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. (70-71)

He also firmly believes that, “... by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens.” (55) Stifled by his philosophy, Parvati, his wife, leaves the house in search of independent salvation. He is baffled by his wife’s quest beyond human relations. She has rejected the role of a householder, and in a way, by her non-conformist act, Parvati has turned Baba’s theories upside down. She ran away to seek salvation elsewhere.

Devi has nothing to do at home. She spends her time wandering in the house, talking to Baba, listening to the stories of Mayamma, the
servant maid, trying her hand at painting and being the perfect hostess. She says in a total boredom that assails her; “I spend hours every afternoon, opening dusty rooms and cockroach ridden cupboards.” (59) After Baba’s departure for New York to visit his daughter, Devi is alone in the house with Mayamma and Baba’s orphaned books. Very soon, he dies in New York and Devi is engulfed by an awesome loneliness and a wave of uselessness. She feels more alone after Baba’s death than when her father died in Africa while she was in the U.S.

Devi sees that the power of choice of her mother-in-law is very different from that of her mother, Sita. Parvati’s spiritual choice is, in a sense, negation of motherhood. She asserts herself by shuffling aside her familial role. Her son, Mahesh, sees nothing but rejection and treachery in her peculiar quest. A mother seeking space for herself outside home is so unimaginable and treacherous a deed for him that his mother becomes a taboo topic for him. Surprisingly negation of motherhood is followed by negation of wifehood as Devi also rejects the role assigned to her and shirks from her responsibilities.

The novel revolves around a number of stories, fables and myths. The use of myth in these stories helps the author to present the relevance of the literary heritage across the times and even in the post modern era. She makes inter-textual links, says P. Geetha:
Devi listens to the fables of ideal women protagonists like Gandhari, Parvati, Sita and snake woman who follow the footsteps of their husbands, and the stories of ferocious women like Kritya and Amba who take their revenge. B. Krishnaiah explains that, “… these stories provide two paths to women either to obey their husbands like the former protagonists or revolt against them in the event of male domination like the latter examples.” (49)

Devi’s grandmother narrates the mythological stories that have initiated her into the numerous subterranean possibilities of womanhood. The stories are significantly placed after situations that call for mythical clarification so that Devi can derive the desired meaning. These stories become so much a part of her life that Devi thinks she is the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. Marriage to Mahesh and his cold and indifferent behaviour brings an end to the dream-like life of Devi. She has heard many stories of harassment at the hands of husbands, but she is not prepared for this kind of treatment from her husband. Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like Amba and suffers like the snake woman of her grandmother’s stories. It is said that the novelist,
Ferrets out the struggle of Indian women in her affiliation with society and man for the sake of preserving her identity. The novel brings alive the underworld of Indian women’s lives – where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival. (Trikha, 169)

Devi recollects all the tales of the mythical heroines told by her grandmother, making subtle comparision between the profound and awe-inspiring lives of the mythological women and sordid stories of real women around her. Devi says; “In my grandmother’s mind, the link between her stories and our own lives was a very vital one.” (30) It is the physical, psychological and emotional intimacy that provides the temper and tenor for Devi’s initiation into the world of women.

Devi’s grandmother dwells more on marginal figures like Gandhari, Amba and Ganga who protested against exploitation in their own powerful ways. Amba is a female avenger who transforms her hatred for Bheeshma, for having Amba, who has been wronged and is denied of her feminine fulfilment by Bheeshma, transforms her hatred into sweet revenge and glorious triumph. Gandhari hides her anger behind a thick bandage for eyes for marrying a blind man. Her grandmothers says:

In her pride, her anger, Gandhari said nothing… her lips straight and thin with fury. Gandhari was not just another willful, proud woman … She embraced her destiny – a blind husband – with a self-sacrifice worthy of her royal blood. (29)
Gandhari’s blindfold is her protest against an injustice imposed on her by getting her married to Dhritrashtra. Devi draws a poetic equivalent of Gandhari’s blind foldedness with that of her own parents. “In their blinkered world they would always be one, one leading the other, one hand always in the grasp of another.” (29) When the terms of marriage are broken, Ganga drowns her children and walks out of marriage. All these women- Amba, Gandhari and Ganga- represent female determination. Devi sees the parallel between the lives of mythical figures of female virtue and that of her mother and finds her mother’s self-effacement meaningless. She also confesses, “The lesson that was more difficult to digest was human anger: that it could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life.” (29) There is a peculiar love-hate relationship that Devi shares with her grandmother’s stories. Though she does not fully agree with the stories, her life becomes traumatic the moment the mythical nourishment is deprived. Devi realizes that she has become a psychological destitute.

Devi does not listen to her grandmother’s tales silently. She is eager to know the why of everything and thus displays the right mood for an initiation. This exhibits an intellectual quest on the part of Devi who hopes for a redeeming answer. Mayamma, on the contrary, firmly
believes that women are not supposed to ask questions. She even advises Devi to be careful when she asks her next question. This is so because Mayamma asked a question only once in her life and the answer she got silenced her for her life time. However, Devi gains wisdom by questioning her grandmother. She does not merely learn the stories, but more importantly she learns that stories are meant to be revised and retold. Retelling a tale of the past thus turns into an act of restoration – restoration of a lost tradition. Divyarajan says, “It is through these subtle allusions, myths and legends that the narrative acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of the crises of identity.” (Bahugana, 1)

In the novel, the stories of alluring, self-sacrificing, and avenging goddesses of the Hindu pantheon serve as a backdrop to the triple narrative. Fed by her grandmother’s stories of palaces, heroic women, self-sacrificing heroines and women turning into men, Devi realizes that she can relate neither to the aggressive model nor to the benevolent model of femininity.

Due to long tours of her husband and total absence of physical attraction, Devi finds herself spending sleepless nights, aching for a “…blissful numbness.” (78) She finally decides “… I must learn to love” (78) and walks out on Mahesh. “I will walk on, seeking a goddess … (95) with so many examples and stories of penance before her. When
Devi’s barrenness reduces her place in the family she is attracted towards Gopal, a Hindusthani classical singer and an occasional visitor to her neighbourhood. Gopal’s music tempts and seduces her when she is becoming desperate due to her husband’s neglect. Devi’s penance takes multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She feels suffocated in the atmosphere and plans definite means of escape. She has her own inhibitions about open action. The realization of her helplessness to take drastic action makes her prone to taking quick revenge. “I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act – humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of the heroines I grew up with.” (95)

The act of walking out on Mahesh provides substance to her life. Condemning her husband to a lonely life without wife or child and trampling on the marital vows, Devi elopes with Gopal. Her decision to walk out on Mahesh and elope with Gopal can be viewed as her unwillingness to live like Mayamma or Sita, who are the victims of domestic violence in one form or the other. She does not want to end up as a self-sacrificial wife. Mayamma, however, knows well that Devi’s relationship with Gopal also will end up in a disaster, but does not discourage her from the plunge. She knows that it is mainly her sense of
alienation that has drawn her to him. Like Maya of *Cry, the Peacock*, who craves for Gautama’s love, Devi also realizes that she has become a psychological destitute and desires to establish emotional rapport with Mahesh.

For Gopal, women appear superficial since they require a man to provide them with a meaning. The only identity a woman has, according to him, is to be a man’s wife or his child’s mother. He is surprised at Devi who refuses to be a mother. He says, “You look so fragile, so feminine … It’s hard to believe that you don’t want a child.” (93) Gopal’s music means to him what the yearning for a descendant had meant to Mahesh. Devi realizes that Gopal is a beautiful despot, who cannot see beyond either the passion of a raga or the various masks of her discrete lives. She comes to know that she would not be happy with him. It is an act of penance, of protest against Mahesh and against her own self. Gopal is a flirt with aspirations for an aristocratic way of life. She realizes that the euphoria is fading fast, and understands that she occupies only a peripheral status in his life and that their inner selves are not united.

Initially, Devi’s relationship with Gopal, is warm and affectionate, and to some extent he succeeds in giving Devi what Mahesh has not. But the moment he lifts his mask, Devi discerns that
Gopal is no better than Mahesh. She reflects, “I have made very few choices … But I was too well-prepared, and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda Road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from all my trials …” (137) Life with Gopal does not afford her the space she craves for. She also gets disillusioned with him and moves once again. She returns to her mother in search of a more steadfast relationship, with an offer of love. Her decision to live with Gopal is hers alone and she sneaks out as “… a common little adulteress.” (95) She hopes “I will soar high on the crest of Gopal’s wave of ragas…” (95) But very soon life with Gopal begins to seem like that “… a kite that had snapped free of its string.” (129)

Devi finds her life with Gopal like that of a kite. As months went by “… the images his music evoked in her were no longer so uplifting, or even neutral.” (129) She observes a winking glance from an accompanist attempting to label her. She finds this unpleasing and unwanted. She locates herself, “In her isolated corner, an outsider forever on the fringes of a less ambivalent identity…” (135) Devi does not find much difference between Mahesh and Gopal. Both of them take their jobs to their hearts and so her presence or absence would make no difference to either of them. Devi finally realizes that, “I was always greedy for good fortune. Foolish girl. I dived into the water … I found
that perfect hyacinth. But as I hung on to it with all my strength, it dragged me down into muddy, violet swamp.” (112) She realizes that she is the one who allowed others to pull her strings and learns the fact that in this male dominated society, it is difficult to survive and find reliability for her emotions because for a man, a woman has always been primarily an object of sex and pleasure.

Devi dismisses all the illusions and ‘Maya’ of his music from her life. She becomes alert to the inner call of self-realization. She is quite caught up in an illusion of womanhood and he serves as the deliverer. He refers to her as his inspiration and supports her through whispers and leers. She hopes to find her own emotional voice through music, which in itself is “…a non-conformist mode of spiritual expression”. (Viswanath, Interview)

Devi thinks that her walking out of Mahesh’s life is her ‘first real journey’. But, after her disappointment with Gopal, she decides to run no further but to return to her mother to start a new lease of life. While Gopal is in a deep sleep, she covers the mirror with the peacock’s neck coloured saree to cover the images that reflect the surroundings. This symbolizes her wish not to carry forward her past memories into future as she plans to start a new life afresh with her mother. By stepping out of marriage Devi dismisses the voice of reason represented by both
Mahesh and Sita. An identity achieved through relationships can never provide fulfilment. Her attempts to date with Dan, to establish a home to elope with Gopal and finally her union with her mother reflect Devi’s frantic attempts to seek a heaven of shelter and psychological security.

Bharati Mukherji’s *wife* and Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* have marriage as their core issues. The protagonists of both the novels struggle hard to enter and also to get out of marriage. Alienation drives both Dimple and Devi to men other than their husbands in their married lives. Their sense of individualism is strong to the extent that they feel trapped in it. In *wife*, Dimple, a middle-class Bengali girl, marries Amit, an engineer, and goes to America with him but there she understands that life is not as glamorous as she has imagined it to be. Cultural shock, alienation, incapacity to form friendship with her neighbours, continual viewing of violent soap operas and her husband’s long stays at office further complicate the basically morbid mind of Dimple. Similarly, *The Thousand Faces of Night* also demonstrates the ways in which the unconscious mind of Devi works. The term ‘night’ refers to the unpredictable ways in which the mind of Devi works.

Devi identifies herself with Durga, the goddess who is the destroyer of evil. She says, “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 demon’s heads.” (41) The ferocious and awe-inspiring image of Kritya is also evoked in Devi’s psyche. She says: “I read about a Kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted … Each age has its Kritya … each household shelters a Kritya.” (69-70) Thus the old and the outworn order has to be destroyed giving place to a new one. In Hindu mythology, Devi, which simply means the ‘Goddess’, the spouse of Siva, unites both the personalities – the ferocious and the sublime. Whether beneficient or cruel, she alone has an independent personality of her own. “As Sakti, she is regarded as the motivating energy of the universe without which even Siva is powerless to act.” (Dimmit, 150)

Devi’s failure to become a mother becomes a crucial factor in her development as an individual. Palmer observes,

... the identification of femininity with an experimentally fluid form of writing which subverts the readers’ expectations of linear, rational discourse, merging identities and ego-boundaries in a manner similar to that which occurs in the per-oedipal mother-infant bond, is a feature of several novels written in the ‘70s and the ‘80. (97)

The primacy given to motherhood in terms of power or vulnerability is a major theme in The Thousand Faces of Night. Devi does not entertain
traditional notion of a woman’s role. For her self-fulfilment does not lie in the bearing and rearing of children, but in recognizing her own inherent potential to live with herself on more positive terms.

When Devi opens the gate of enters her mother’s house in Madras, she is awed at the wilderness of garden which usually is neatly kept. She also hears “… the faint sounds of a Veena, hesitant and child like, inviting her into the house.” (139) Her mother knows that Devi would come back to her and so by retrieving the long-forsaken Veena she identifies with her daughter. Nilufer E. Bharucha says, “So in a paradoxically regressive movement, Devi finds her enlarged female spaces within the inner recesses of femaleness itself – her mother’s womb-like fortress.” (Bharucha, 104)

Devi is representative of the present-day intellectual woman. She fails, confronts loneliness and alienation. Unable to understand imponderable man-woman relationships, she feels that she has an ephemeral existence. Devi has a mundane attitude towards her lover or husband and fails to connect with them mentally or emotionally. The lack of commitment that characterizes Devi’s intimate relationships with men is probably her reaction to her mother’s smothering control of every relationship in the family. Devi refuses to take control of anything
or anyone in her life. She has no initiative, no urge to do anything, and waits passively for others to arrange her life. The one redeeming feature in Devi’s character is her interrogative spirit which eventually prods her out of the life of lethargic material comforts and puts her on the quest for identity.

In her returning to her mother, Hariharan seems to suggest that Devi and Sita create the space between them to stand face to face in order to empower each other. Sita, Devi, Mayamma and Parvatiamma – either barren or widowed – are united and form a network with other women through their own stories of suffering. Thus Githa Hariharan has a myth-making representational power in terms of sisterhood.

Hariharan creates a sisterhood among women who share the same existential crises, and she creates a new bodily image different from the bleeding female bodies defiled or isolated, or exploited for reproduction. Instead, she shows desiring female ‘bodies met in blood and sweat’ through intoxicatingly erotic rituals. (Ohira, 76)

Stories of Sita, Devi, Mayamma and Parvatiamma reveal the friendship between women of different castes, generations and educational backgrounds. Mayamma, a victim of violence at the hands of her mother-in-law, husband and son is supported by Parvatiamma. Mayamma supports Devi who is also childless like her. In this context, Ohira’s comment is very appropriate when he says,
Hariharan’s depiction of a bleeding community of women allows for the endless multiplication of differences among women, but it is strategically powerful as an image of a communion in which women can share their painful or joyful experiences and understand their bodies, a communion that allows women to rebel against a repressive system and to build on their new empowerment. (Ohira, 73)

Devi’s return to her mother at the end prompts Vijayasree to comment thus: “In working with the new feminist language of matrilinear transmission, Hariharan reinterprets and re energizes the archetypes of mother and child from the perspective of feminist sisterhood.” (180) Myth-making can be viewed as a process of networking among the women of different ages and generations, an attempt at renewing the whole community of women through re-presentation of myths. To quote Vijayasree again,

Marital discord and women’s quest for identity outside marriage is turned into a remarkable rendering of the collective struggle of women for self-liberation through the author’s play with narrative structures - framing texts within texts, with texts overlapping in curious ways; her carnivalesque accumulation of intertexts ranging from the tales from the Mahabharatha to folk stories and her deft interweaving of these with the lives of real women. (177)

Devi’s grandmother narrates a story which is appropriate to the occasion. Instead of giving a direct reply to Devi’s queries about the conditions of women around them, the parallels and mythological
equivalents have a profound impact on Devi’s mind. When Sita came to the house of her in-laws, she had brought a veena with her and used to play on it whenever she found leisure. Her father-in-law once admonishes her for neglecting her duties and questions her whether she was really a wife and a daughter-in-law. The position of bride is more a daughter-in-law than a wife, in the extended Hindu family and the in-laws and other family members view her with suspicion even as she grapples with the new situation and tries hard to come to terms with herself in the changed environment.

Like Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, search for self assumes great significance here also. These writers have placed their women protagonists within a strong matriarchal tradition that is tremendously influenced by women mythological characters. Indian mythology and African mythology offer rich resources of treasures for its women. Like Hariharan, Morrison also uses myth in *Tar Baby* and her other novels. Jadine, educated in a western context which excludes the African American practice and influence, fails to acknowledge the damager of the disconnection from her roots and the necessity of preserving her origins. She has to learn the solidarity of her fore mothers who have reciprocally provided each other with caring and nurturing. By turning down her aunt, Jadine is rejecting the role of mother and daughter. According to her, “… there were other ways to be woman …” (TB, 284)
Being aggressive, Son, the black runaway slave wants his relationship with Jadine thinking that woman should be submissive. But Jadine is unwilling to sacrifice the ambitions that have driven her to realize herself. She realizes that she cannot accept or fit into Son’s value system. She finally leaves him to live life on her own terms. Women of Toni Morrison and Githa Hariharan refuse to let tradition and gender roles determine their definitions of self. They grow as they progress from positions of vulnerability to relative strength. They achieve psychological and individual wholeness when they are able to fight any kind of oppression.

Sita, is first seen as a cool, self-confident and middle aged woman who welcomes her daughter back from the U.S. She fits closely to Baba’s description of the ideal womanhood. Sita, as her name implies is an ideal wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She plays every move with dexterity “Like a veteran chess player,” (14) and answers every question “… with expert counter attacks.” (14) A month after Devi’s return to India, she prepares for her Swayamvara “… with the same eloquent hand.” (16) She is very particular about an arranged marriage and she finds the proposal from the Sreenivasans good enough for her daughter. Sita believes most in the power of her own magic. After Devi is recalled from America, Sita wisely allows her daughter to indulge in a few tantrums before she arranged for her to be despatched this time to a permanent destination, wifehood.
Hidden under the heavy trappings of marital responsibilities, Sita is an embodiment of efficiency and her planned operations are moves towards realization of accepted social image. Her husband is a picture of reticence, his heart in dreams and folklore. He allows himself to be the raw material in Sita’s hands to be shaped into any form she wants because he finds it easier to yield than to assert. Directing the lives of her husband, Mahadevan and her daughter Devi, she has lost control of her own life. Sita has invested so much of herself into it that abandoning it amounts to abandoning part of her selfhood. When Mahadevan suddenly dies, while of posting in Africa, she burns his dreams with all his unfinished papers even before his body is burnt, and returns to Madras.

Sita, in her desire to become a goodwife and a perfect daughter-in-law, has trampled on her music and has destroyed the artist in her. Her desire could never be fulfilled, as a result of which she faces sense of discomfiture and futility. Her father-in-law once admonishes her for neglecting her duties and questions, “Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?” (30) Sita, in the face of the rebuttal from her father-in-law, has hung her head over the veena for a while and then pulled the strings out of the wooden base. Mary Eagleton in her book, Working with Feminist Criticism, explains a woman’s unusual position which could be related to Sita’s position. She says,
This unease [inability to speak or being silenced] in women is, partly, a product of patriarchal power. One location for patriarchal power is language and the public platforms where language is used most prestigeously. Areas of linguistic status in our culture – the pulpit, the bench, the board, and the dispatch box – are associated with men. (16)

Devi sees the parallel between the lives of Gandhari and that of her mother. Her mother also acknowledges this fact when she says, “Gandhari’s anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold, burnt in a heart close, very close to mine.” (29) However, Sita dismisses these stories as they offer no tip to her to deal with reality. The photo of Sita holding the Veena prompts the significant narration of Gandhari’s story. Gandhari becomes a symbol of pride, self-denial, and even anger. Her blind folding is an act of protest. In the same way Sita’s decision to discard the Veena is an act of both vengeance and denial. It is, no doubt, loss of her autonomy. But paradoxically it is also usurping power. She is able to subvert the role assigned to her and emerges as the head of the family. She is no longer an oppressed wife and daughter-in-law as she inflicts lack of control on her husband and powerlessness on her daughter.

Sita is aware that her marriage is devoid of passionate love. Still she is prepared to do anything to protect her marriage. Very deftly and without creating any scene, she nips off her husband’s advances towards
young Annapurna, her orphaned distant cousin, who comes to stay with them. “Amma, wise and jealous, a bitch guarding her own, saw it first … she crushed it ruthlessly.” (77) If he becomes a successful business executive, it is mainly because she mercilessly crushes his passion for folklore. Thus her calculative moves take her steadily to success. Sita thinks of the life of an ideal woman as soiled and undesirable but ironically, she succeeds in being an ideal wife with a dogged determination and relentless self-discipline, leading her husband more like a conductor than as accompanist. Though Sita’s survival is far more efficient than Mayamma’s, the efforts it has cast, the pain it has caused, however subtle, has been just as deep. A symbolic correlative is seen in the way she trains the jasmine creeper to grow horizontally, filling its specified spaces on the supports provided, without allowing it to grow upward as it is its nature.

Sita appears to be stronger than Devi and Mayamma. She does not waste her time on reminiscences of the past. She knows what she wants and works for that with single mindedness. But Devi knows that even women like Sita who achieve their goal of wifehood and motherhood with a single-minded devotion to it, have to have their share of painful sacrifices. Sita has to give up her first love, Veena, and dreams of genius and fame, and cut herself off from the link with the
past in order to be a perfect house keeper, a blameless wife. She too is reborn through her daughter’s adventures in life and she retrieves her lost self by returning to her music, to her Veena.

When Devi runs away with Gopal thinking that her life now will be better than that with Mahesh, Sita is shocked. She thinks that her respectability, her very name, has gone to dogs. She spends her rage, her acrid bitterness on the over-pruned plants, the cook and the chauffeur. Yet she knows that Devi would eventually come back to her because disillusionment with her lover was bound to come in very soon. Renewal of her long lost relationship with her discarded Veena is a significant step towards Sita’s inner healing. It would liberate her from merely playing assigned roles. The inviting call of Veena that Devi hears on return, suggests renewal of a new, positive relationship with the self and the daughter, and the renewal of life itself.

Indrani Aikath Gyaltsen, in her *Daughters of the House* attempts to project a new sense of woman’s identity just as Githa Hariharan does in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Instead of succumbing to societal pressures, Chchanda of *Daughters of the House* decides to take advantage of the ostracization imposed on her and daughter Paro. Devi walks towards her mother to learn about her womanness in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, whereas Chchanda looks at her daughter for
self-image. Both have, in their own way, rejected the idea of being reflections of the male, but instead of sinking into a despairing isolation, they have resolved to rewrite another bond, the female-female one. Both for Devi and Chchanda, there is a hope and sense of rejuvenation as the past is erased and the present becomes an experience to build a future.

Mayamma, the old care-taker-cum-cook at Mahesh’s house, is the greatest sufferer of all women. She has lived all her life trying to satisfy others. Married at twelve to a useless gambler who came to her every night, she knows no happiness in marriage. Being illiterate and unaware, she has suffered a lot at the hands of a domineering mother-in-law and an animal like husband and son. She feels that success in life for a woman depends on her ability to endure and go on in this male-dominated society. Thus Mayamma accepts her fate, never questions and bears the brunts of cruelty that society had ordained for a woman – as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and a mother. She has never made a choice, she has no choice at all but to live a predetermined life. Mayamma represents the generation of Indian women who accept their fate, without complaint by following the karma sutra. They are meek, submissive, bound to the traditions of family and the institution of marriage. They bear the brunt of cruelty that society had ordained for them. Inspite of all this, she is able to be firm.
Mayamma is a pragmatic story-teller who tells tales of real life which are stronger than mythical stories. She narrates the story of her own life, a life that she believes to have been ruled by gender. As she has failed to bear children for over years, she has become the object of ridicule and the consternation of her family members. Her purpose in existence depends on being the mother of a son. She would take up a series of penance to get over barrenness. Sudhir Kaker analyzes the socio-psychological implications of a woman’s situation in the Indian context and points out that motherhood provides redemptive factor for her. He says:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identify that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is son, is both a certification and a redemption. (Kakar, 59)

Mayamma is humiliated at the hands of her mother-in-law for her inability to conceive a child. She has borne the torture by her mother-in-law who even used to put her stringent tests like letting her to go to sleep on an empty stomach every alternate day. Women like Mayamma continue to live a tortured, humiliating life because they have no option, no way out. Bleeding within, seeking solace in the routine of life and religious worship, they go on.
Mayamma’s mother-in-law, “Unable to check Mayamma’s insides … had contented herself with the astrologer’s promise that Mayamma would bear her many strong grandsons.” (80) One day, the wish seemed to have been fulfilled. However, “… blood came, too soon, too soon … the new 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.” (122) Still she has never complained because she felt that success in life for a woman depends on her ability to endure and go on. “I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry.” (126) The lesson she has learnt from her own life’s experience is that women suffer because they are women and that the need of the hour for them is to learn the strategies of survival.

Inspite of her own difficult and painful life, inspite of knowing no happiness with her husband and son, Mayamma is able to be a bed-rock to Mahesh’s family. Mahesh however, is able to neither see nor appreciate the enormity of her suffering. In a very off-hand manner he brushes it off. “Those days are gone and there’s no point listening to all her stories about them.” (82) Mayamma never questioned the atrocities, never raised a voice or a finger and tried to run away from the living hell. According to Devi,
Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand … she snarls and sulks … but she has no bitterness. (135-36)

Mayamma is the archetypal female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as she has expected to. Illtreated by her husband and her spoilt son, she finds refuge in the house of a rich relative Parvatiamma. Frail and old, she now replays in her mind the myths that she could not play out in her real life. Though physically unable to change the course of destiny, she has found the power to transfer the male constructed benevolent gods into forces that she can identify with, in her mind if not in reality. Mayamma finally realized her identity not as the mother of her own wastrel son but by becoming the mother figure, a nurturer and a symbol of reliability in Mahesh’s household. Baba trusts her, Parvati entrusts all the keys to her, Devi cries to her and Mahesh counts on her to maintain the house for him.

Mayamma learns the strategies of survival and as she puts herself, “I have learnt how to wait, when to bend my back, when to wipe the rebellious eyes dry” (126). Many women, like Mayamma, believe that survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of a woman. Through Mayamma, Githa Hariharan appears to indicate “…the innate
strength of the women who is able to bounce back to normalcy inspite of all her tragedies.” (Nityanandam, 184) Devi finds a good friend in Mayamma and is all attentive in listening to her experiences so that she can draw useful essence from them to make her life better.

After finding life with Mahesh miserable, Devi shows her resolve in leaving Mahesh. When her expectations about Gopal become awry, she shows even greater determination in leaving Gopal also. Gopal’s self-centeredness forces Devi to make what seems a final choice, to return to her mother to start life anew. The world that she wants to experience is like the rain blessed garden “… lush in spite of its sand-choked roots” (139) – a life in all its multi-faceted myriad coloured possibilities. She has to experience the happiness that can come from oneself “… for whatever is dependent on others is misery.” (68) When she hears the faint sounds of veena, she feels as if her mother welcomes her into her house. Now Devi knows that the battle has begun once again and that she should be true to herself. This prompts Indira Nityanandam to praise her when she says, “… it is Devi who is the modern feminist.” (126)

Paranjape raises certain questions regarding Devi’s decision to return to her mother, “What are the implications of such a return? What has Devi learnt? What kind of future does she have now?” (Paranjape,
20) When both Mahesh and Gopal fail to perceive her emotions, she doesn’t try for another relationship to find solace. She exercises her choice to stage a comeback to her mother.

Any relationship fails to be a satisfying one when there is no compatibility between the two partners. Devi’s relationship with Mahesh lacks warmth, caring and understanding. This is what Ajay Kumar believes when he says that, Mahesh

… is a poor ‘Manager’ of emotions, his imperceptible nature could never make him a reliable husband. Mahesh expects that everything he does in life must bring to him positive results, he is in grip of his cursory commercial world. He treats his wife as an object to satisfy his “organized sexual urge” which engulfs Devi and gives rise to an awesome loneliness. Her existence with Mahesh is like living in a dungeon with hardly any breathing space between the two. (70)

Avis Joseph remarks that Devi has felt like a ‘bold heroine’ when she has walked out on Mahesh. But her passing relationship with Gopal has given her only superficial feeling of freedom. Once she becomes aware of this and her place in his life, she realizes that she has made a wrong step. She attempts to correct herself by leaving him too. But, “Now she is not on the run, but she feels like a fugitive escaping from captivity to a stage of self recognition.” (126)
Indira Nityanandam also expresses a similar opinion when she remarks that,

Though she lacks the will to choose and her early decisions are faltering, we note a development in her character. Initially she is easily influenced by societal role expectations. She quits the U.S and leaves behind Dan because of a sense of filial piety, marries Mahesh as a good daughter should, attempts to be a full time wife and house maker as an Indian Pativrata should. Gradually she shows her resolve in walking out with Mahesh and even greater determination in walking out on Gopal. (191)

One may agree with B. Krisnaiah when he remarks, “She feels courageous and confident and determines to escape from confinement to a state of self-identity. She gains strength to assert herself and survive on her own with her mother, leaving aside the anchors from outside.” (61) Sindhu Sarah Thomas is full of appreciation for Devi when she says,

Devi refuses to let tradition and gender roles determine her definition of self. She grows as she progresses from position of vulnerability to relative strength. She achieves psychological and individual wholeness when she is able to fight any kind of oppression-cultural or traditional or societal. (46)

C. Vijayasree also falls in line with B. krishnaiah when she says that Devi returns to her mother to begin her battle all over once again, “… not a defeated or dejected loner, but a fugitive sure of her…survival, determined…to start from the very beginning.” (139) and she further
views Devi’s evolution of self and her assertion of individuality and her autonomy as “… the celebration of the power of the Divine Devi and that of the entire community of women … are no longer vehicles towards somebody else’s ends, nor are they adventures on other people’s quests but questers seeking their own salvation.” (181)

Thus The Thousand Faces of Night is the story of Devi’s quest for a self-image. Having failed to define her identity as a wife or even as a rebellious lover, Devi finally returns to her mother, “… to stay and fight, to make sense of it all …” (139) and to start from the very beginning. It is in her relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find an identity for herself.

Several Indian women writers have attempted to transform a woman’s status from victimization to empowerment and project a new sense of woman’s identity. Githa Hariharan too deals with the question of woman’s identity and her innate strength lies in her struggle for survival. Dissatisfied with age old norms that emphasize woman’s passive role as a wife, Githa Hariharan attempts to establish a new order. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman’s role and edifies the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self. Urmila Verma pays a rich tribute to the novelist when she says, “It is a prophetic voice, announcing the emergence of a new identity”. (Varma, 104)