CHAPTER I

INSTINCTIVE COMPUSIONS FOR HIATUS

Suppose you cut a tall bamboo in two;
make the bottom piece a woman,
the headpiece a man;
rub them together
till they kindle:
tell me now,
the fire that's born,
is it male or female,
O Ramantha?

Vachana by Devara Dasimayya, (quoted on p.vi)

Translated from the Kannada by A.K. Ramanujan.

These words preface the Prelude to the novel The Thousand Faces of Night. They throw light on the androgynous principle which is neither male nor female, the search for 'self' which is complete and above all barriers. This search, irrespective of any gender bias, reveals the longing to achieve a certain defined purpose. Sh. Adi Shankaracharaya spoke about 'Ardhnarishwar' around thirteen hundred years ago. According to him even Shiv cannot move without Shakti. Both complement each other. Prof. Nitin J.Vyas speaks about harmonious co-existence, "Harmonious co-existence and freedom for all are the ultimate aims of man. It is collective cultural vision of justice and action."

In the novel The Thousand Faces of Night taken up for probe in this chapter, Hariharan gives the message of harmonizing human threads through the characters depicted in this novel. The struggle between the two sexes, however, creates difficulties in their search for the ultimate. She has brought this struggle to the fore with the beautiful writing of this novel. She presents the pangs of women belonging to different generations in different situations representing the faces of thousands of women in this world. Commenting upon The Thousand Faces of Night Pradeep
Trikha writes, “It brings alive the underworld of Indian woman’s lives where most dreams are thwarted and the only constant is survival.” The attempt to achieve the ‘survival’ can be seen in The Thousand Faces of Night in different characters in different circumstances. In order to survive, the characters make different efforts. Each individual has a ‘hiatus’ in his nature which is filled only by experience and understanding. It is the individual’s balancing of oneself in a society along with one’s instinctive compulsions. Inderjit Rai Wadhawan writes:

An individual living according to certain ideals imposed upon him by society reacted to and clash with them, or suppressed his basic nature. The inhibitions and taboos, consequently, resulted in restricting and thwarting the growth of man, since too much was expected of him by the society in its service and man had to sacrifice something of his natural spontaneity to fulfill the demands by living up to the ideals.

If the social system is unjust, it hampers the growth of not only the concerned individual and also kills the rational culture. In a society where women are shackled by numerous social and religious customs, it is difficult to develop a peaceful and prosperous nation. From their very childhood, different things are inscribed on their minds that determine their ideas, dreams and way of living. When they grow up they see the world through these ideas. Women in the process of being socialized are taught to be subservient to the patriarchal order and to derogate their own sex. Through pedagogic discourses they teach other women to follow the same, that is, to be passive, meek, emotional, caring, and obedient. The family tends to condition a girl child in a different way as compared to a boy. She is instructed not to be argumentative and to do what is said to her. She is taught not to be assertive as she is to be moulded for facing the different problems in the house of her would-be husband. She is taught to fit in the role fixation for a woman. A daughter senses her mother’s disappointments and frustrations and perceives them as the destiny of being a woman. She learns that she has to take care of the others’ need. Her own needs and desires are often ignored. A boy on the other hand realizes that his needs will be taken care of. This conditioning causes immense loss to the realization of ‘self’ and the self-dignity as human beings. Women have been treated as second rate citizens. Hariharan explores the inner world of such women as are striving towards self-realization. The social system overpowers them. In order to survive in this male-dominated society; they can either accept the norms or rebel against them. Hariharan deals with all these aspects in her novels. By choosing female protagonists and exploring their inner world, Hariharan consciously portrays those unique
features of woman's psyche which remain hidden from the world outside. Commenting on women writers like Hariharan, Dr. S. Prasanna Sree writes:

Through this medium of expressing themselves in writing, women have investigated and published those aspects of their lives as sexual beings that have not previously been acknowledged by society. Despite late 20th century, women are still very far from attaining the required level of socio-cultural, educational and economic advantages usually enjoyed by men.

Hariharan deconstructs the common sense notions in myths and proposes rethinking. The common sense notions support patriarchal order and construct an identity of ideal womanhood in the light of dominant male culture. She throws the light on these notions and reveals these to be man-made constructs. She dexterously interweaves the myths in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and the lives unfolding around which do not always rise to the heroic proportions mentioned in the myths and stories. Chaman Nahal in this context writes:

I would like to examine whether we have a replacement model in feminine fiction. It is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myths- the conditioning myths with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct replacement models. We all revere Sita and Savitri; they did something out of loyalty, out of dedication. We may not like it today, but can we disown them? We cannot escape the myths. So, the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have.

Before analyzing the female characters, the brief saga of the novel is like this. The novel tells the story of three generations. The story begins with Devi in America who is there to get a degree. Here she meets Dan who is a black American. The writer does not tell the reader in detail about her relation with Dan. But she hints at the cultural difference between the two that cannot be flourished into the permanent relation like marriage. Devi denies his offer of marriage. She does not find herself at home with that alien culture.

The pull of her mother Sita brings her back to India. Here Sita like a chess player makes her moves and gets Devi married to Mahesh. Sita who herself is a true picture of patriarchy wants Devi to be the same. The writer focuses on the interplay of autonomy and intimacy in relationships especially in marriage. Caring and love for each other is important for everyone but in woman it is taken for granted. This virtue in woman is devalued for the selfish purposes of male-dominated society. For the benefit of everyone in the family, sometimes women suppress their true nature. Sita does the same. She sacrifices her love for music for the welfare of the
family. Sita is a strict disciplinarian and a reticent mother. In bringing up Devi, She employs iron-will and iron-hand so that Devi may become adaptive but Devi always shows signs of rebellion by taking flights of fantasy. Sita reprimands her for dreaming as she herself is truly aware of the result of shattering of the dreams.

The relationship of Devi with her husband is no more than satisfying the animal instincts. The veera instinct with which one can realize the intensity of emotional relationship is missing in them. Mahesh is more interested in expanding his business rather than fathoming the feelings of her wife. He represents the hegemonic view of the society. So Devi becomes silent like her mother Sita. Though the silence in both the characters represents the seething anger in them yet the way to represent that anger is different. Both are strong willed and the presence of animous can be felt in both. The inability to change the things and the suppressed desires lead Devi to fantasies, imagining herself as Durga and Kali. On learning that her mother-in-law Parvatiamma left the home in search of God, Devi feels a kind of closeness to her. Her rebellion is a kind of vengeance that can be seen in her eloping with Gopal, a musician. Finding that Gopal too is unable to fill her void, she returns to her mother. The lack of self-actualization in Devi, in the beginning of the story, leads her to go astray but in the end she realizes her roots.

The stories of Mayamma, Uma, Gauri and other minor characters are skillfully interlinked in the novel giving the readers the authentic pictures of the inner life of the women suffering due to patriarchy.

Devi, the daughter of Sita, grows up among the stories and myths narrated to her by her grandmother. Both psyche and politics play an important role during her development. As a curious child Devi queries about the conditions of the women around them. Grandmother always makes her understand her inquiries through story telling. These stories are decoded and a moral is always drawn out. So in her very childhood, Devi is socially conditioned to achieve the idea of ideal womanhood. These stories and their morals are narrated to prepare her for the role of an ideal woman. These myths constitute the fabric of the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The story telling reveals the pedagogic discourses that frame the patriarchal social set-up. They contribute to promote dominant patriarchal ideology. As a child, Devi questions the myths provoking simple questions like: is there no way out to change the situation? It illustrates how curious she is to know the facts and also keen to change the established order. Here one traces
the imprint of Hariharan’s ‘undefined yearning’ which the writer has since her childhood in
Devi. Devi also is keen to know the reality. Sometimes to verbalize the emotions, articulate the
views, and ask questions, howsoever contrary to those of others around, become extremely
important. Silence is not always golden. Even if the other components of society do not support a
girl, Devi takes the step to break the silence herself to know the answers to her questions.

Devi’s curious mind reveals indirectly that the myths and the epics need to be reviewed
and reinterpreted from the humanist point of view. Instead of being completely conditioned by
the cultural influence she tries to find the way out. As she grows older she begins to see that the
problem lies in finding the suitability of ideal mythical characters in the contemporary society.
While commenting on such situations, Devi once speaks thus:

I must have, as I grew older, begun to see the fine cracks in the bridge my grandmother
built between the stories I loved, and the less self-contained, more sordid stories I saw
unfolding around me. The cracks I now see are no longer fine; they gape as if the glue
that held them together was counterfeit in the first place. But the gap I now see is also a
debt: I have to repair it to vindicate my beloved storyteller.6

Hariharan throws light on the warped social conventions not only through main characters but
also through minor characters. As a mature artist, profound thinker and keen observer, she
records the plight of women in India. The social and cultural prejudices affect the women of
every class whether they belong to poor, middle or upper class. Hariharan exposes the injustice
imposed upon them. A woman may belong to any class or category; she is a victim of patriarchal
domination. The faces of exploitation can be different but a society based on harmonious
existence is still a distant dream. Women created by Hariharan revolt for freedom and try to find
out the ways to get it. In the modern novels of every language, the revolt and the restlessness of a
modern woman is being painted with true colors. Hariharan has also sketched in her novels the
dreams and fates of the thousand faces of women. The sordid stories that Devi finds unfolding
around her makes her muse over the reality of existence and the garb of deceit over it. Whether
women resist or accept these factors, determines their destiny. In spite of different social classes,
the plight of women continues to remain the same as seen in this novel.

Gauri, the maid servant in the house of grandma of Devi, has worked in the Brahmin
houses to collect dowry for her marriage. She has been working hard to build a little pile of
dowry, a custom prevailing in her class:
They ask for fifty sovereigns of gold, Amma,’ she said to my grandmother. ‘And after ten years of work I have only fifteen. There is still the nose-stud to be bought, the toe-rings, the stone earrings set in gold, and the thali (p. 31).

Social, cultural, economic and political forces structure women’s oppression in multiple ways. After bearing hardships and collecting dowry, she somehow gets married just to face another reality. Her husband and her in-laws treat her badly as she says, “Her husband was an animal. They treated her like dirt’ (p. 32). When Uma, the cousin of Devi, gets married she too is ill-treated by her father-in-law and her husband. She silently resigns herself to her fate and endures a life devoid of happiness. The whole story of her life comes out as:

Her husband and his father drank till she was stupified with fear; even her girlhood, spent with an indifferent father and a hostile stepmother, had not prepared her for this trial. Her foreboding grew into terror when her drunken father-in-law kissed her roughly on the lips (p. 35).

While telling the story of Uma, grandmother instills courage in Devi to face the challenges of fate that can transform hatred to victory. She tells her the story of Amba, another mythical figure of Mahabharata. Bhishma abducts Amba and her sisters from their marriage place for his step-brother Vichitravira. Amba requests Bhishma to let her free. He allows her to go but the king of Salwa whom Amba wants to marry rejects her on the plea that she no longer belongs to her now as Bhishma has won her and her sisters in Swayamvara. On returning, Amba pleads Bhishma to marry her but Bhishma has already taken the vow of celibacy and is helpless. In anger she goes to the forest and performs penance. Shiva, pleased with her penance blessed her with a garland and promised that by wearing this garland, anyone can defeat Bhishma. But Amba finds none who has the courage to fight with Bhishma. With hatred in her heart, she burns herself only to be reborn as Shikhandi to take revenge in the war-field of Kurukshetra. The story of Uma, Gauri and the mythical characters like Amba and Gandhari make deep impressions on the mind of Devi. She daydreams more and more about female avengers. She begins to identify herself with the mythical characters in dreams. Hariharan provides cultural colour to the novel by naming the characters as Devi, Sita, Uma, and Gauri. Devi has the power to show courage and rule. In this novel she shows signs of rebellion and courage by taking flights of fancy, imagining herself to be a ‘Devi’ of strong will. It comes out as a revelation of in-built mythic phenomenon in the psyche. This fury has the roots seeking blossoming of the psyche with posturing for self-control. “I lived a secret life of my own: I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut
off evil, magical demons’ heads” (p. 41). Som Ranchan in his book Das Mahavidyas musing over the image of Kali says: “According to the Jungians, Kali today is the archetype for transformation for women who are now challenging male patriarchy for change of relationship and for change in polity.”

Devi’s dreams are, however, interrupted by her mother. Her mother speaks to her father: “I want no more of these fantasies. The girl is almost a woman, she must stop dreaming now” (p. 45). Devi’s dreamy eyes seek something beyond the literal world her mother arranged for her. Freud explains the role of phantasy as:

The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality. These motivating wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the person who is having the phantasy.

These two worlds of Devi are never found coming closer. Her personality, moulded by myths and different real stories existing around her, vehemently seeks liberation that has the projections of effulgence of the consciousness. The shadow in the Jungian parlance thus seeks to get accommodated with the conscious. And Devi desperately desires to relegate the complexes clutching the psyche.

The mistake that often parents make is to restrict the dreams of a girl child. Sometimes the limits are drawn for her. The emotional security and empowerment is a boon for the child during tender years of socialization. Empowered girl child has less fear of failure. She can cope with the uncomfortable situations in later life in a manner that booms her with self-confidence. Human relations that could have directed her life to fulfillment become exhausting, causing hindrance to the process of development depriving her of the organic sense of togetherness. It frustrates her attempt of growth and fulfillment during various developing stages of human life and relationships. It is very important to get the congenial environment for the full growth and development of an individual like Devi. However, she is denied the chances to grow and fructify.

After the death of her grandmother, Devi goes to a college hostel and later to America. She lacks home, happiness and conflict-free life necessary for wholesome growth. She is sent to America for further studies where she meets Dan, a Black American. She uses Dan’s interest in her as a shield in “the white claustrophobia of an all-clean, all-American campus” (p.3). Her
smoking, drinking or establishing intimacy with Dan is a rebellion against her own culture in which she has been brought up and against her mother who always makes it a point that her friends belong to good Brahmin families. In reality she does not treat him as a real person but orders this relationship “to the blurred regions of fantasy” (p.3). Their friendship is like an alien mirage due to cultural differences. He sees in her a possible partner but Devi finds herself unable to escape from her background. Though she tries to rebel but in reality she is attached to the moral values of her native land. The instant adventure and pleasure is soon over. Breaking away from her native roots and absorbing new culture in an alien land seems a difficult task for Devi. A constant realization of socio-cultural distinctions makes her see: “Dan was different. His charm lies in the vast distance they had travelled towards each other, and in Devi’s awareness that this distance was not, would not be completely bridged” (p. 5). In America she finds a culture alien to her own culture. Devi attends a party with Dan and his friends. In the circle of westernized families in a ‘smoke-filled room’ (p. 5), she feels alienated and uncomfortable. Presenting the host an Indian gift, a wall hanging with the picture of Lord Krishna, she realizes that she has brought a wrong gift to the host.

A brass goddess holding a lamp could have been used as an ethnic ashtray. Or safer still, a bottle of wine. It would have been less original, but it would not have set her apart from the others with such finality (p. 5).

This separateness overrules the possibility of imposing permanence such as marriage. Devi feels that she is going to be lost and finds herself in a kind of complex alien land where everything is different. To marry Dan is like ‘a dream of clandestine passion’. To adjust means she has to sacrifice many things including emotional relationships. Though geographically she is in America but in reality her mind and spirit belong to India. The pull of her mother to return to Madras is so strong that she faces the dilemma as whether to stay or to return her home. The return to the womb that keeps one rooted firmly to the ground or to remain dreamy and roam the beyond is a big question for Devi. This inner compulsion actually is her shadow overriding her growth. She is driven by an instinct to return to India to “a secure womb that sucks me in and holds me fast to its thick sticky walls” (p. 13). The decision that she takes is due to the instinctive compulsions. These instinctive compulsions keep her shackled to the fettering complexes of her shadow.
Devi returns to Madras because “Amma’s letters brought with them an unspoken message of loneliness, poignant in its quite dignity.... But the image of her alone by the sea teased me like a magnet” (p. 16). Sita, like a veteran chess player, invites all her relatives to prove them wrong that she has not made a mistake in sending a young unmarried girl to America. In an Indian society where many parents do not allow their girls to go outside alone, Sita shows the courage to send Devi to America alone. She feels proud when Devi comes back after receiving her letter. Devi observes Amma’s expression of joy as: “See how I take risks, Amma’s look said. She is different, she is special, but she is just as pliant as your home-grown daughters” (p.15). She is prepared to be shown to the various prospective suitors. The parents are looking for a ‘fair, beautiful, home-loving and prepared to adjust’ bride for their son (p.17). By giving these instances Hariharan has brought forth how stress is laid on physical beauty of a girl. Devi’s grandmother used to rub her with coconut oil and turmeric till she is ‘fair like Damayanti’ (p.19).

In an Indian society, it is important to match the horoscope of a boy and a girl for the purpose of marriage. Hariharan brings forth this ritual to provide cultural tint to the novel. Devi ironically views the whole episode of matching horoscopes and meetings as traditional swayamvara. Amma does every effort to match the horoscope of Devi to various eligible bridegrooms for a happy married life. After meeting the six prospective bridegrooms, the horoscopes of Mahesh and Devi assure Amma of their being prospective happy couple. However, it proves wrong later on.

The case of Devi’s relationship with her husband proves how men and women torment themselves and each other by silence when the need of the hour is to unburden their hearts by giving vent to their feelings. Mutual respect, understanding and love are of prime importance to keep the marriage going. A family life which is a miniature of social life, depends on the mutual goodwill, respect for the individuality of each other. All this is lacking in the case of Devi and her husband. She drifts away from her husband because he is more of a businessman than an ideal husband, who is always busy in making contacts with the outer world than filling her void. Neither Devi nor Mahesh has any interest in making the marriage work. Her relationship with her husband is marked by loneliness, silence and discontent. Lack of communication stifles and chokes her voice and disintegrates her sensibility. In her husband’s large old family house, she
feels lonely. Her father-in-law is a good companion but he, too, tells her stories about how to be an ideal woman. He says:

A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him, a sumangali, her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermilion, her arms and neck still ornamented with bangles and gold chains (p. 66).

Baba’s stories make her aware of the golden traps in marriage. All the stories narrated by him make a woman stand on the spiritual pedestal and deprives her of the right to be a human. “The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no feasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in the heavens” (p. 55). He tells her the mythological tales which are “for a woman, who had already reached the goal that will determine the guise her virtue will wear” and have a “centre point, an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife” (p. 51). This brings out the conventional patriarchal attitude shared by most males, as Devi remembers:

Alone, alone in the house with Mayamma and Baba’s orphaned books, I read a page he had not read to me. I read about a kritya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroy the house in which women are insulted. She burns with anger, she spits fire. She sets the world ablaze like Kali shouting in hunger. Each age has its kritya. In the age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a kritya (pp. 69-70).

Baba’s stories only preach woman to be self-sacrificing and undemanding. His stories are different from the grand-mother’s stories. The difference in stories of Baba and Grandmother also exhibit two different ways of looking at the world. This reflects that patriarchal attitude is established through pedagogical discourses so that women can be made to learn to enjoy their subordination taking it as glorifying womanhood. On the other hand, the stories of grandmother prepare Devi to be independent as well as courageous to face the odds of life. Her stories made Devi see the different possibilities and dynamic view of womanhood. Hariharan makes a deft distinction between Baba’s stories and Grandmother’s stories and conveys her message with full conviction. Devi feels:

Baba’s stories remind me of my grandmother’s but they are also different. They are less spectacular, they ramble less. Her stories were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into his subterranean possibilities. His define the limits (p. 51).

After some time her father-in-law leaves to accompany his daughter and soon after dies. Except Mayamma, the family retainer, she has no one to talk to. Devi is trapped by an awesome
loneliness and a wave of uselessness. This sense of futility further worsens the situation. The writer displays the image of plants and garden. Baba and Sita are engrossed in maintaining their gardens, pulling out the stubborn weeds from their respective gardens. But Devi decides to grow a garden of weeds. The images throw light on their attitude towards life.

Hariharan, through her fiction, exposes the foibles and social evils in order to get rid of life-suppressing cultural values. In a Hindu family, the in-laws expect a lot from the newly-arrived bride. She tries hard to adjust and come to terms with herself and the changed atmosphere. This new atmosphere is quite different from the atmosphere in which she has been brought up. Whatever a girl hopes for in her future husband, Mahesh has everything. Devi is impressed by his frank attitude. He is a rich business man, having enormous riches and a palatial house in Bangalore but he lacks emotions which are the integral part of any relation. He marries Devi because it is a thing that everyone does and says: “Thank God we Indians are not obsessed with love” (pp. 54-55).

On the other hand, he makes fun of Devi’s education. Instead of understanding the real cause of her frustration, he blames her education for that. He remarks: “That is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn’t she a happier woman than you are?” (p.74). In a patriarchal social set-up marriage is considered as the ultimate destiny of a woman. Not education but marriage is considered to be the main aim in life.

Mahesh likes her to stay at home rather than go out, work and earn. Whenever she tries to engage herself in some other activity, he simply refuses her to do so. He is a male-chauvinist who does not want that his wife should take part in the male world. Their cultures are different in the sense that Devi has the influence of western education so that she finds nothing wrong in playing cards but to Mahesh it is only men’s genre. Devi remembers requesting Mahesh: ‘Teach me how to play rummy,’ I said. ‘But we play for stakes,’ Mahesh said. ‘I’ll borrow some money from you then,’ I said. ‘Don’t be silly, all the others are men,’ he said (pp. 78-79). Devi’s anger and suppression can clearly be felt in her words:

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard–earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when he reaches out; and dreams instead. (p. 74).
In order to hurt his male ego, Devi confesses that she met five men in her life before him, but Mahesh ignores. Whenever she desires to do something in her leisure, Mahesh disapproves. She feels that her education has not prepared her well to face the realities of life. She says: “My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood” (p. 54).

Devi tries to resign herself to her ‘precious dungeon’ but her suppressed anger denies her to be a mother of Mahesh’s child. She feels she ought to do something as a mark of protest worthy of the heroines of the myths she grew up with like Amba who takes revenge and denies her feminine fulfillment and achieves glorious victory. Marriage in an Indian society means the total transformation on socio-cultural terms. Both Mahesh and Devi fail to realize that marriage is neither a system of slavery, nor an escape route. Sita tries to share the problem of Devi by writing a letter to her that states:

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 years, when you lisped that precious word Amma, what vistas of joy opened up before me! Mahesh writes that you are tired, depressed. Would you like to take a holiday in Madras? Or we could go somewhere cool and fresh, just you and I, and talk about everything, your plans for future, as wife and perhaps mother? (p. 86).

Sita’s advice sounds hollow for Devi. She does not crave for motherhood. No one can direct and control the mind of Devi. Mahesh is brought up in such an atmosphere where a woman is treated as subordinate. Therefore, he behaves like the same in the marital relation also. He expects Devi to attend the household chores and does not let her enjoy her individuality. She has no friends, no other occupation to engage her. The vast emptiness of her in-laws, her loneliness and Mahesh’s indifference make her attempt frantically to find security. Instead of sharing her feelings, his admiration for his colleague’s wife, her ‘boundless energy, her bubbling infectious enthusiasm’ is the hint of an innuendo aimed at Devi for her to take a cue from (p.56). He admires her saying, ‘she keeps herself busy but has enough time for children...I have never seen such well behaved children before. Lucky Ashok!’ (p.56). He fails to understand the emotions of her wife. Devi finds herself a victim of loveless marriage. The same situation is explored in Anita Desai’s novel **Cry, The Peacock** and Bharti Mukherjee’s **Wife**. In these novels the couples lack emotional relationship. However the complexity of the situation is dealt differently in their own peculiar way by the characters. In an Indian society where marriage is treated as a sacred relation, both
Mahesh and Devi break this relation without much difficulty. Rather than realizing that man and woman need each other to nurture relationships, the abyss between them is widening. Marriages are floundering due to lack of adjustment. Dr. Kanupriya remarks on man-woman relationship:

Man-woman relationship whether within or outside marriage needs to be liberated from conventional approaches to it in order to become a satisfying and fulfilling one. Marriage is neither a system of slavery nor an escape route. It is not even a contract – for it is wrong to approach it in that spirit.9

From her grandmother Devi comes to know about her mother’s self-sacrifice to achieve ideal hood. Her grandmother tells her the story of Gandhari in Mahabharta who blindfolds her eyes when she comes to know about her husband’s blindness. Devi’ inquisitive mind thinks:

I said nothing, and was not precocious enough to ask how Gandhari’s story and Amma’s came together. Or perhaps I knew. I must have known, even then, that Gandhari’s pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering, 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. (p. 29)

Comparing the story of Gandhari and her mother, Sita, Devi evokes in herself the parallel between divine anger and human anger. To her divine anger can make heroism possible. She wonders: “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.” (p. 29)

Social pressures weigh heavy both on Devi and on Sita. In the case of Sita, it results in self-inflicted suffering. However in Devi’s case, the response is in multiple ways. Instead of following the images of Parvati and Gauri, she rejoices herself in Durga and Kali. She wants to escape from the stifling atmosphere. She thinks of the means of taking revenge:

In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears, and that accursed desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood, blur the bold strokes, black and white, of 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 heroines I grew up with (p. 104).

Later in the novel, Devi is fascinated by an Indian singer Gopal for his sincerity and devotion to work. She elopes with Gopal in order to take revenge on Mahesh. Rama Kundu remarks, “It is less for love than to show her rage of rejection of a demeaning marriage that had crushed dignity, individual aspiration and mocked her emotional imaginative refinement.”10 Her elopement is an
action compelled by her inner thrust for liberation. Later on in the novel when Devi leaves the house, Mahesh’s indifferent attitude can be inferred from the way he informs Sita that Devi has left the house. He informs: “All necessary action being taken” (p.108). All the necessary actions that should have been taken earlier are of no importance to Mahesh. He is not intelligent enough to understand what was necessary.

In her heart of hearts, Devi knows that even Gopal is not the right partner for her. This reminds the reader of the well-known novel *The Guide* by the great writer R.K. Narayan. In this novel Rosie, the heroine, is not satisfied with her husband. Her husband, Marco, has neither time nor any desire to fathom the feelings, yearnings and desires of his neglected wife. Rosie becomes intimate with Raju, a lover of life. Though responsive to Raju’s love, Rosie sometimes feels guilty that she is another man’s wife. With the same yearning Devi elopes with Gopal to take revenge on Mahesh as he is unable to understand her feelings. With Gopal, she gradually develops a sense of void which she has with Mahesh. She feels lonely and alienated. She feels like becoming a nowhere woman. Gopal is engrossed with himself and he does not recognize her individuality. This compels Devi to stray away in search of her ‘self’. She realizes, “Whatever is dependent on others is misery; whatever rests on oneself is happiness; this in brief is the definition of happiness and misery” (p. 68).

Devi is yet to reach her destination and carve out a niche for herself. Once again she protests and craves for survival on her own. Therefore, in the end she realizes that she has enough of drifting between the worlds like a floating island searching for props. She seeks to find her own authentic ‘self’ and secure some firm holding. She goes back to her mother in search of her roots. She passes through variegated relations till she establishes a contact with her real self and takes a step to attain equipoise. The music of playing veena can be heard once again to welcome her.

Devi who has been shown disintegrated and fragmented in the beginning of the novel, moves to attain the harmonious wholeness towards the end of novel. The novel explores Devi’s journey from the hasty decisions taken earlier in life to sensible decisions taken later in life. Devi establishes herself as an autonomous being, free from restrictions imposed by society, culture and also free from her own guilt and fears. She is broad-minded yet she is not so much westernized in culture. Her coming out of the senseless relation with Dan, owing to alien culture
and society, can be seen as the first step towards self-reliance. Her stepping out of the threshold of married life is the second step towards autonomy although it only proves to be an anticlimax. Taking the third step, she leaves behind the sleeping Gopal: “Devi knew the time was right; if she did not act now, she would be forever condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidity of the mainland” (p. 138).

Devi is not a rebel who causes destruction to the social order just for her sexual freedom. She has had many relationships in her quest for fulfillment, mutual love and respect. She dares to cross one patriarchal threshold and is stepped into another. To her shock, again she finds herself in the same situation where her free spirit is curbed, her feathers are pinioned and her individuality is not realised. She is educated abroad. She desires more to life than merely passing her days in the kitchen and waiting for her husband to return from tours. She craves to come out of this whirlpool. She merely clamors for fulfillment in her relationships. Pradeep Trikha writes:

Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of the Night* compels the reader to undergo an enigmatic experience, along with the protagonist, straight from a woman’s life. She ferrets out the struggle of Indian woman in her affliction with society and man for the sake of preserving her identity. The dissolution of the social system of relationships is not Devi’s agenda. She could be called a rebel to the extent that she has not remained within the social norms of marriage and has gone out for intimate relationships in her search for satisfaction. Devi actually assumes the new role of a woman in deciding the course of her life and creating her own pathways. She can be seen struggling to wriggle out of the trappings. In her relationship with Gopal, Devi’s disenchantment can be seen symbolically in the peahen which gets reflected in the thousand-eyed feathers of the peacock and thousand faces of Devi’s conscience is reflected in the liberation and identification. R.K. Mishra, while discussing psychological exploration of inner mind of Indian women, says:

In her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* ... [Hariharan] denounces the subservience of Indian women and advocates their emancipation from the bondage of male domination. She depicts the tragedy of women, who in their inner mind react to this kind of subjection and persecution. Devi ... [as] central woman character in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* has to endure all persecution in her social life. This novel thus presents a vivid picture of patriarchal dominance in social life. It also strikes a note of feminist approach in the theme of women’s psychology.
Devi is on the stage where things fall apart and the centre cannot hold. She, however, is quite aware of the emptiness and absurdity around her. She feels lonely and alienated in the world of her marriage where the delicacy of her mind and feelings is ignored. She finds herself isolated and opts for illusion. This illusion reveals a bleak and sinister vision of life. She realizes her mistake and tries to get out of this alienation. In search of her roots, she goes back to her mother, the panacea of her life. However, towards the end of the novel, she is able to hold the centre by trying to harmonize the things by returning to her roots. Towards self-realization, she takes the ultimate step. She comes back to Madras in search of her roots in the same way as she has come back from America, an alien culture, to her motherland. In Jungian parlance Devi thus bridges the hiatus between the shadow and consciousness. Reena Kothari writes:

Devi rejects the idea of being a reflection of the male. However, instead of sinking into a despairing isolation, she has resolved to rewrite another bond, the female-female one. In the novel, this bond derives its power from the women’s previous sense of isolation, from their ill treatment by men and from their discovery, through suffering, of the saving grace of shared experience. For Devi, there is a hope and sense of rejuvenation as the past is erased and the presence becomes an experience to build a future.

Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* explores the overall emotional reactions and spiritual responses of female characters. In the novel Devi’s mother-in-law, Parvatiamma, leaves the house to find God. Hariharan focuses on the psychological torments of Parvatiamma who is God-fearing and religious. The story of Parvatiamma is told to Devi by Mayamma. According to her she is a very kind-hearted lady. She strongly believes in spirituality and sticks to it. She does not even hesitate to leave her home. Parvatiamma expresses the urge of a woman to escape from family ties in search of her self. Her daring act is rebellious in nature. Devi feels the ability to choose in her mother-in-law. She finds herself close to her as compared to her own mother whose choice drives her to self-denial. Even Mayamma notices a close resemblance in Devi and Parvatiamma. ‘...she reminded me of Parvatiamma then. I know too that the day would surely come’ when she, too, would leave the house ‘with the overflowing bosom and the dreamy, wet eyes’ (p.117). Meena Shirwadker in this context writes:

When an unhappy wife has no place to turn to, and the husband neglects her, she sometimes tries to spiritualize her sorrow into devotion to God or by dedicating herself to social work. The reason might be that that the *Pativrata* image is so deeply ingrained in her mind that love out of marriage is unthinkable and there is also no possibility of returning to the parental home. }
Being individualistic and temperamental to compromise with the harsh mechanical existence, Parvatiamma finds it difficult to accept the life devoid of spirituality. She rejects the assigned familial role. The awareness and the rejection of the present state of life is in itself a kind of protest symbolizing the rising of awareness. She might have understood the patriarchal power which makes woman weak. Devi feels, “Had she misread Baba’s stories? Or had she turned them upside down and taken the contradictions, the philosophical paradoxes, to their logical conclusion”? (p.64). Mahesh feels only treachery in her quest. Premila Paul discussing The Thousand Faces of Night says:

One of the important concerns in The Thousand Faces of Night is how women deal with the sanction of space in the Indian society. The novel presents the effects of patriarchy on women of different social classes and ages and particularly the varied responses to the restrictive institution of marriage. It evokes characters from mythology and the lives of saints and relates them to the characters in the novel. Githa Hariharan shows that all through the ages the society has sustained the same ideal of womanhood by handing down behavioral patterns. But some characters like Sita and Parvati, though they are steeped in the Hindu value system, manage to find space and scope for rebellion within the institution they conform to. They use their state of oppression as a weapon against the very structures that hold them back. This subtle but powerful act of subversion and control makes them feel they have their space and power to direct their destiny and even that of others. But in effect they have internalized marginalization and they contribute considerably to the reinforcement of patriarchal values.¹⁵

In her childhood, Sita, the mother of Devi, has the ambition to become a veena player. With efforts she achieves her aim. Though she is not beautiful, yet she makes up by excelling in music and other domestic chores. After marriage she finds herself in a different world where different duties are expected from her as a daughter-in-law. Once when she gets rebuked from her father-in-law that she is not an ideal daughter-in-law, she pulls out the strings of veena in order to achieve that so-called ideal womanhood. She, in anger, burns all her photographs in which she poses with her veena. She cuts herself off from “her own mother, father, the gurus of her childhood” and she writes to them “the occasional duty dictated letter” but never visits them (p.103). She suppresses her desire and devotes all her time and energy to save the family’s prestige and honour with “order, reason, progress” (p. 26). She opts for silence. The silence which is preferred to speech sometimes signifies suppressed anger. S.P. Swain muses this over the situation of women in India:
A woman in our society is a non-person, an appendage, a slave to the master – man. Women in our culture are not individuals in their own right but objects through whom man aspires for self-affirmation and self-relationship. The culture that created a Sita and a Savitri has denied the rights of existence to woman save as daughter, sister, wife, mother etc. She is yet to achieve individuation and an authentic self-identity.

Sita marries at the ripe age. She loses her identity in the real sense after her marriage and the birth of her daughter. In fact, she loses her identity in the massive shadows of femininity. In a male-dominated society, a woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a sacrificing mother and an expert in home affairs. She has to play multifarious roles in a family so that it can run smoothly. To come to terms to all these roles, she is also expected to have the attributes of submissiveness, tolerance and sacrifice. Sita pays a great price in her life to become a perfect wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She gradually realizes the harsh realities of life.

Due to gender bias and social conditioning women discover hurdles in their self-development. They are expected to be self-sacrificing, caring and undemanding. Their roles in myths are eulogized which preach women to remain bound to the confines of home and are controlled by the social system. Abha Prakash Leard in this regard speaks:

The relegation of women to the domestic space is also supported by a strong link in Hindu belief, between the conflation of women’s domestic and spiritual “career” within the dimensions of family life, thereby removing the need to renounce domesticity in their search for salvation. The association of the male sex with spirit and the meditative principle, and of the female with matter and energy, reveals the dichotomy that has successfully shaped and differentiated the sex-roles and lifecycles of men and women in Hindu society.

The qualities in women, on the other hand, are devalued and are used to facilitate the growth of others especially men. In the novels of many other Indian women novelists, one finds the same situation reflecting the fate of Indian traditional women. The traditional, duty-bound peasant women are beautifully sketched in the fiction of Kamala Markandaya. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* achieves admiration due to her self-sacrificing nature. Whenever she shows initiative, it is to satisfy those urges which make her an ideal woman. She is a person whose instinct is to protect and assist others regardless of personal interests. In an Indian society when a girl gets married she is supposed to take all the responsibilities of her husband’s household. Rukmani is the daughter of the headman of the village, but, because of the lack of dowry, she is married to a tenant farmer. Rukmani never grumbles, never feels disappointed after marrying a farmer below
her status. She accepts her destiny without questioning. She sacrifices her desires to fulfil the needs of the family. Similarly Sita, in the novel under study, sacrifices her desires to achieve the same idealhood.

Good housekeeping, good taste, hard work. These were Sita’s guiding mottoes as she had taken charge as a young bride, slowly, subtly, so imperceptibly, that nobody suspected what strength lay behind those smooth, child-like features, and the soft whispering voice (p.101).

Sita is deprived of her love of playing veena. Her husband, Mahadevan, is a wooden character who fails to realize how these sacrifices have been killing her spirit and making her stoic. She suppresses her desires continuously which result in her hard exterior. Sita’s becoming reticent is also a form of rebellion. Sita suppresses herself to cater to the needs of the family, but remains unhappy which is confirmed by her extreme silence. Her silence is synonymous with the quietness of the strings of veena. She devotes her complete energy for the well-being of her husband. “Sita was at liberty to take her husband by the hand and lead him from promotion to promotion, till he was within the exclusive circle of fast-rising executives who brought home three thousand a month”(p. 104).

The role played by society imposing the virtues epitomizing the ideal womanhood can clearly be seen in the character of Sita. Society allows enough freedom to men to develop their self, whereas women have to struggle at different stages while also bearing the responsibilities. They face difficulties at different emotional and physical levels. This social conditioning creates hurdles in self-development. Her life is controlled by some other entity, the social system. Jasbir Kaur, while discussing the women, writes:

As a social person, woman has to abide by certain rules which in fact suppress the awareness of her inner self. Woman wants to spread out but society’s mode of conduct wants her to be a living mannequin only.18

Sita moves like a pendulum between the question of her existence and her society which expects her to achieve idealhood. The aim imposed upon her to achieve idealhood wins and she devotes all her life to it. Beneath this success lies the corpse of her desires.

Sita achieves her aim of ideal womanhood with a strong determination, self-discipline and dexterity. She is devoted and lost in the sea of duties towards her family. She shadows her husband in all problems. The silent elucidation of female strength can be seen in the way:
She took her husband by hand and led him from promotion to promotion till he was within the exclusive circle of fast-rising executives who brought home three thousand a month. And this was, she explained to him with infinite patience, only the bottom rung of the ladder he was to climb (p.104).

Sita is a woman who never complains and knows how to make sacrifices without fanfare. She can see life in entirety and is quite aware of the bold choices made in youth. She manipulates the departure of Annapurna, a distant cousin of Sita, when she realizes that Annapurna is becoming a danger to her married life. She accepts and forgives the infidelity of her husband. She is clever enough to retain her wifehood. She knows the inevitability of cause and effect.

The role of the mother in preparing her daughter to face the hard realities of life is shown in the relationship of Sita and Devi. Sita becomes an authority figure in the life of Devi. Devi grows up in the submission to this dominant authority figure. Sita always acts as an anchor rock for Devi. She is a strict disciplinarian and is rather undemonstrative in showing her love for Devi. Devi wonders at the loving relationship her friends have with their mothers. She remembers:

Her love was too snobbish to caress freely. The only time I remember her touching me was when I lay half-conscious in a fever and I felt a cool, dry hand lightly stroke my face. Even in my semi-conscious state I knew what was expected of me: I was not to let her know that I had noticed, I was to continue to feign deep sleep (p.85).

Sita does all this because of the harsh treatment she got from life. She wants to prepare her daughter to face the bitter realities of life. Her experience says, “If there was one lesson Sita had mastered in her years of study, it was this: you did not get results with wishy-washy half-heartedness” (p.102).

After the death of her husband, Sita welcomes her daughter back from U.S. with self-confidence and a picture of dignity. She bears alone the responsibility of arranging the marriage of her daughter. She allows Devi sufficient time to become “adept at wearing the night jewels and sari, the right smile,” (16) so that she can plan her future life dexterously. On the one hand, the cool, self-confident and middle aged Sita has the sense of responsibility towards her relatives and, on the other hand, she also knows how to save her house and garden from becoming filthy. This proves how perfectly she manages everything.
She hired two cooks and rented a large house for a month, so that all the guests would be well looked after with home-cooked food. I don’t want my house and garden to get filthy, she said to me, and we moved to the house that had seen so many weddings, its storeroom now overflowing with coconuts, rice and jaggery (p.23).

Hariharan expertly reveals before the reader the social gatherings at the time of marriage in India. She flavours the novel with the traditional colour of rituals followed at the time of marriage. At the time of Devi’s marriage, she details:

The relatives began to arrive, four or five a day, and the house filled up. Children ran between the mattresses that lined the floors and dodged their scolding mothers. The women held small conferences about saris, the flowers to be bought, the invitation cards to be handed to the guests personally, during visits that would stretch over weeks (p.23).

She is of the belief that the plant in the form of Devi that she has pruned and potted would take in the soil. To her the soiled ground is life which is devoted to being an ideal woman. Contrary to her expectations, Devi’s elopement after marriage is like a betrayal to her. She repents over the years of iron-like self control. She is shocked at Devi’s betrayal. She redeems:

She had torn her respectability, her very name, to shreds. And for what prize? A year or two wallowing in the arms of an illusory lover, in a den of riff-raff; then, total, abject degradation, the slime and filth of an uprooted woman’s decay (p.108).

Sita is pretty sure that Devi would come back to her. Sita’s resilience can be compared to that hard cactus which is impervious to sudden changes in weather. In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. This system carried on through generations because mothers want their daughters to be safe and socially acceptable. Sita is now ready for self-examination. She dusts veena and waits for Devi to come back to her. K. Damodar Rao observes:

Although Sita does not react to her daughter’s actions in a positive manner, she realizes that it was a fate similar to her own, suffered once. In her case a more tradition-bound society and family prevented her from asserting her individuality and hence her penance was muted, often manifested in self-inflicted suffering. But in a different context, the situations and attitudes remain the same while the penance takes a multiple response.19

In an Indian society, mother starts to prepare her daughter for marriage from the very childhood. To be back from the house of her in-laws is considered to be a matter of shame. So no stone is left unturned to make the daughter expert in every chore. Reena Kothari in this context writes:
...In the Indian cultural context, reviewing this relationship is particularly symbolic when it concerns the relationship between a mother and a married daughter. Daughters are conventionally brought up to believe that their parent’s home is a temporary abode and that it is the husband’s house which has to be eventually considered as home. Once married, they are treated as visitors when they ‘visit’ their parents. But ‘returning’ married daughters cause shame to the family’s reputation and are a source of despair to their mothers. In the light of this cultural background, the determination of the women in this novel to review the meanings of ‘home’ and ‘motherhood’ takes on powerful overtones.  

Sita does the same too. She tries to control Devi with a strong determination. Her garden and Devi are under her strict control. The way she tackles the growth of her plants is described as:

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 (p.98).

Sita remains a strict disciplinarian for Devi and tries to make her ‘an obedient puppet’ (p.136). Devi’s dreamy eyes yearn for something else than the world of her mother. Later in the story, whatever happened in the life of Devi makes Sita think that one should listen to one’s mind. One should not put so many of restrictions on oneself that one’s identity is lost. This hiatus in the life of Sita is filled by the experience that she gets from her own life as well as from the life of Devi. Hariharan is among the major Indian novelists in whose works the culture and society in India is faithfully reflected in their variegated aspects. Jaya Baliga, while defining culture, says:

Culture is partially at least, a system of patterned symbolic interaction, which is perpetuated from one generation to another. The self is created in this context of communication and sharing interactive symbolic processes. These processes are both the material and non-material aspect of the culture in which an individual is born and grows. It is these which help us define and interpret the growth into personhood of any individual.  

Indian culture is relational and familial. It is through harmonious relationship that one can cope up with the pain and alienation of our times. Since the self is shaped by cultural beliefs, it becomes one’s duty to understand one’s culture and throw out whatever is rotten in it and at the same time preserve and respect the remaining. Githa Hariharan’s characters, their actions, their interpersonal relationships and their stories, all are enacted on the broad arena of Indian society. Throughout the novel, it is the female characters that are highlighted and the male characters are portrayed in relation to women. Her women characters emerge as examples of self-assertion and are highly individualized. Hariharan portrays the female experience in her encounter with men at
different stages and in different relations. Sita is like a river. If its flow is barred at one place, it will make its way from some other place. Nothing can stop it to meet the ultimate sea. Though her dreams are thwarted by family and social norms, yet she makes her way towards self-realization.

As is well said by a renowned writer ‘No man is an island’. No man can live individually. One always needs a company or society to develop oneself. Man is a social being. The individual as well as the groups depend on each other to a large extent. While living in isolation one feels pressures of solitude and living in society one finds difficult to cope up with outside pressures. So a man keeps on rolling like a pendulum and is never at rest. Solace comes only, as described in the Indian scriptures, when one learns to live in the state of mental equilibrium which is difficult to attain. This mental equilibrium is nothing else but the state of ultimate bliss or mental harmony. One who is able to maintain this state under various conditions and pressures, is able to live in the state of bliss whether living in isolation or in society.

Hariharan depicts the life of different women to show multi-structure of our socio-cultural milieu. She also describes the difference between their upbringing atmosphere and thoughts. R.K. Mishra, in this regard, writes: “Since India has been a tradition-bound nation, its women are also shackled by numerous social and religious customs and conventions that render them incarcerated behind curtains.”

Mayamma got married too early in life that she could not understand the real meaning of marriage. The useless gambler who came to her every night, “his large hairy thighs rough and heaving on her” (p. 80) made her lost the real meaning of marriage. She learnt only about lust and the power of unhidden animal cruelty only. She has no bitterness towards anyone. Through Mayamma, Hariharan exposes the helplessness of traditionally suppressed rather illiterate woman. She becomes the target of social norms. Her disarming passivity makes her suffer patiently for quite a long period. If she is barren and could not conceive for quite a long period, the situation becomes worse. She is considered an unlucky one. In the case of Mayamma, her marital life was at stake at one time because of her inability to produce a male child. Her barrenness was treated as a curse, a slur on femininity and a flaw on womanhood. She narrates her life to Devi with tears. Her husband was interested only in her body as she says, “He grew a little more crooked every day” (p.80). She does not have the liberty to do the things of her own
choice. Once she tries to hum a tune which her mother used to sing. Her husband, crossing all the limits of cruelty, kicks her on her bent bottom. He calls her “a shameless hussy” (p. 111) and kicked her “after a night of whoring in the rain” (p. 111). She remembers him as a tyrant:

He snorted like an angry bull. He pushed my sari aside even before my head touched the pillow, I was a silly little girl then, his grunting frightened me. If I turned away to sleep, he held my hair tightly with one hand and hit me with the other... satiated with his carnal night on the field and draw me to himself with rough tenderness (p.118).

Mayamma suffers at the hands of her mother-in-law who smears the burning red and freshly ground spices into her barrenness. She also asks her to cut her breast open to bathe the lingem to beget a son. Her mother-in-law fed her yesterday’s rice as “What is the use of feeding a barren woman?” (p. 112). In a society like this where women are expected to accept the fate without questioning, undemanding and suffering in silence, M.B. Gaijan comments: “Orthodoxy in some cases is deeply rooted Indian characteristic, particularly religious based.” Her identity rooted in tradition, does not allow her to rebel. In order to keep the relation survive, she suffers in silence.

Mayamma’s mother-in-law makes her undergo penance to change the course of her horoscope. She is the conventional figure who never blame her fate. She never once raises question or her voice against these atrocities. She takes bath at four in the morning, meditates for hours, and prostrated herself at the feet of goddess and believes: “A woman without a child, say the sages, goes to hell” (p. 81).

After ten years, Mayamma’s long-cherished dream of getting a child is fulfilled. She gives birth to a son and, after eight years, her husband disappears, taking with him all the money in the house. Like a devoted wife, she waits for the return of her husband. Her mother-in-law holds Mayamma responsible for the curse she has brought upon her household. After bearing the cruelty of her husband, she tries to infuse meaning into the life of her son only to acknowledge the fact that her son is the xerox copy of her husband. He hits her mother with an iron frying pan when she refuses to give him her diamond earrings. After the death of her only son due to illness, Mayamma tries to find consolation in the house of Parvatiamma, the mother-in-law of Devi, as a servant considering all the chores as the duty of God. She performs all the duties as if she were pleasing God. The suppressed anger and sufferings of her heart comes in the form of tears on the day her son died. She wept from the core of her heart remembering her youth and her past. The writer details the pain of a mother as well as a woman as:
He had never been a son to her as much as he was then, now that she had curbed the flow of her pleas. The fever rose and fell, rose and fell till he was reduced to helpless, delirious moaning. The day he died, Mayamma wept as she had not done for years. She wept for her youth, her husband, the culmination of a life’s handiwork: now all these had been snatched from her (p. 82).

Suffering at the hands of the society, Mayamma is now ready to play her role in society, expecting the other women to do the same. She becomes a mother figure in Mahesh’s household. She wins the faith of Baba and Parvati who entrust all the keys to her. It is a stoic acceptance of destiny in Mayamma’s case. As in the ‘Prelude’ of the novel remembering her experience she warns Devi to be careful, “... when you next ask a question” (viii). She has only once asked a question in her life and the answer of that has silenced her for all times. Devi, unable to conceive for a long time is advised by Mayamma to undergo penance to turn the wheel of fate: Pray, pray, Devi. Tell the beads till your fingers are calloused and numb with exhaustion. Sit between five fires in a grove of penance for the sake of your unborn son (p.93-94). She also tells Devi that the key to marriage is the ability to be patient even after suffering a lot from the members of her family. Devi feels:

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 had had no choices really.... She snarls and sulks... but she has no bitterness (pp. 135-36).

This is the way of uneducated Mayamma to realize her ‘self’ in the same manner as has been taught in the Indian culture since ages. Indira Nityanandam throwing light on the art of Githa Hariharan says: “Githa Hariharan here indicates the innate strength of the women who is able to bounce back to normalcy in spite of all her tragedies.” 24

The novel under probe expresses the attitudes of both Mahesh and Devi towards the sufferings of Mayamma. Devi finds an emotional support in her and Mahesh treats her only to maintain the house for him. It reveals as to how Devi, being a woman, can realize the plight of another woman by virtue of her womanly instinct and sensibility. The affinity between Devi and Mayamma is inspiring. Both understand each other’s problems. Though both are born in different times and social statuses feel love and sympathy for each other. On the other hand Mahesh cannot realize the same because of his spirit of masculinity and his traditional ego. Mayamma, inspite of suffering and facing tragedies in life, has the power to show the inner
strength of women. Her sympathetic attitude for Devi radiates into her concern for womankind in general. She does not stop Devi when she elopes with Gopal. She remembers how Devi used to cry 'like a trembling little bird' against her shoulder (p.118). She feels Devi's pain and disillusionment as a picture of her own suffering.

Mayamma had to suffer in the past not only at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law but at the hands of the uneducated village doctor also. When she lost her first baby while narrating her story to Devi in the Prelude, she remembers:

The oily pock-marked village doctor, his hand still dripping with my blood, looked shifty. A woman must learn to bear some pain, he mumbled. What can I do about the sins of your previous birth? (p. 1).

Society in the case of Mayamma proves to be very cruel. She shows strength of her character when she approves the decision of Parvatiamma to leave the home in search of the meaning of life. She continues to take care of the family after the departure of Parvatiamma. She, however, goes on living, suppressing herself and advises Devi also to do the same. Devi is exactly the opposite of Mayamma. Though she tries to adjust in her family but is not as submissive as Mayamma. She realizes that she must stop the struggle for balancing herself in the family and steps out of the senseless relation. Earlier women were denied any education. Home was their only space. Their dexterity was limited to the household chores only. Later, when women started getting education, their response to various situations can be seen in multiple ways. And Devi's asking questions is indicative of an intellectual quest.

Hariharan gives a free expression to what exactly a woman as an individual wants. In her journey, she describes different paths taken by different women to achieve their 'selfhood'. They respond differently to their circumstances owing to the social and cultural set-up in which they live but their ultimate aim is survival. S. Indira observes:

The novelist traces the battles of woman in her relationship with man and society not to urban existential angst but to times immemorial unlike other writers such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.25

Whether a woman is educated or illiterate, one fact that is common to almost all the societies is that woman has never been considered equal to man. She has always been treated as property of man. A number of Indian novels focus on the problems of women. This novel deals with the
problem differently because of its social and cultural concerns. The influence of epics stands
greatest on the Indian life and especially on its women. Different writers belonging to different
regions re-wrote them in their own languages. The response of the readers to the epics that have
become the part of their consciousness and the writer’s attempt to explore can be assessed
simultaneously. Hariharan deals with all kinds of characters, be it uneducated Mayamma, the
self-controlled Sita or the educated Devi. Mayamma finds consolation in the stoic acceptance of
destiny. Sita slaughters her desires for the family. Devi avenges herself in multiple ways. Thus it
is amply clear that female characters in this novel get themselves hurt in order to show that they
have been wronged. These are the compulsions made by the temporarily- acquired instincts
which result in self- inflicted injury. It is only the crisis of identity which is the root of all
problems in human life.

Hariharan is a progressive writer who does not sever her ties from the society. Her works
reveal the tapestry of patriarchy and at the same time attempts to celebrate feminine selfhood and
freedom. Whenever a woman tries to change the prevalent social conditions, she is restricted at
different levels. The Phallocentric world keeps the women in darkness and does not allow them
to experience a new life. The self abnegation leads to sorrow. Sometimes they find themselves in
a situation where it is not possible for them to express their anger to those who hurt them. They
suppress their dreams and also show dislike for themselves for finding themselves in a situation
where they cannot react. The reader can easily assess the tensions between the individual desires
and social expectations faced by these women. The oscillation between the individual will and
the expectations of the society contains the possibility of initiating a change. They are aware of
the socio-cultural aspects that affect them and total consciousness, which is a distant dream, can
be achieved only gradually. Sita, born fifteen years after Mayamma, is quite different. A.G. Khan
commenting upon The Thousand Faces of Night says:

Employing four different narrators Githa Hariharan surveys the feminine destiny from
different angles. Hers is Maha Bharat from the feminine perspective telling not of Karna,
Arjuna or Bhima but of Gandhari and Amba. There are only two clear cut slots women
can fit in—one leads to sanyaas in a spirit of resignation and fatalism; the other a full time
housewife. Mayamma and Parvatiamma chose the first; Sita opted for the second—
“blameless wife”. In either case a woman has to be “re-potted” (107) to acquire a “quiet
dignity” (16). Devi in her bid to step out of the two circles finds herself in a space “in
between, around, on the edges of, all circles.”26
The peculiar quality of this novel is that all the female protagonists do not tread on the same path. They do not react in the same manner. Their problems are different in nature, circumstances and reactions. The most remarkable is that none of them commit suicide like the female protagonists of different other stories. They rather confront the situation in their own way. If Devi tries to take a flight from the stress situation and swims against the current, she has the ability to realize that life is worth to be lived. Hariharan, in an interview, says:

She (Devi) has to have this sort of compromised move ahead, but definitely a move forward... And her return to her mother, to me, in a sense, seemed a move forward because her progress has to be seen as linked up with the other women—the old woman Mayamma is taking a step forward by letting Devi go, leaving a marriage and all the conventions Mayamma is a reluctant custodian of. And the mother’s progress is linked to Devi’s rejection of her marriage—at this point, the mother returns to her interrupted life with music, to her veena. All three women are, in a sense, parts of a composite Devi figure. I use all the names of the women quite deliberately, all aspects of goddess. Finally, they are not separate from each other. If one of them makes progress, it feeds into the others.  

Devi knows the importance of, “lush in spite of its sand-choked roots” (p. 139). In this regard, she presents a picture of new, modern woman. She decides, “To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning” (p. 139). On the other hand, Sita, after killing her ambition, opts to flow with the current but soon realizes the futility of her existence. The yearning to revive her spirits, after getting the experience of Devi in her life, swirls to achieve its aim. She revitalizes the cadaver of her desires and dusts veena to make a fresh start.

Hariharan captures the social and cultural disfiguration of the society and makes the reader think that one has to change one’s point of view to look at things so that the challenges of the society can be faced effectively. In a society that is becoming increasingly progressive, the conflict between our traditional values and new-found mores hurts no one else more than the fair sex. The age old mindset inherited from culture sometimes interferes but a fair judgment leads to successful opening of the new vistas.

Life keeps on rolling till one does not stop at a particular point in one’s life and tries to look back into the mirror of incidents and memories or tries to evaluate the gains and losses of his birth. The concept of self-realization, as is quoted in the Indian scriptures while on the path of spiritual journey, occurs once in a thousand years in the case of great saints. In general terms the concept of self-realization helps the individual to look back in one’s life to evaluate it and, after
continuous analysis; one can see the threads of one’s cobwebs where the pattern has gone wrong. The present novel of Githa Hariharan is replete with such characters. Both Sita and her daughter Devi are brought up in different environments, times and backgrounds. While one is quite away from the much spoken concept of globalization and mass-communication revolution and the other gets an opportunity to have acquaintances and passes a significant period of her life in America. Sita’s life is full of odds which she masters with her intelligence and dexterity. Devi, who spends a couple of years in America, enjoys all kinds of freedom. She cannot adjust herself thoroughly to a traditional life as she has been influenced by the modernistic ideas of the west. She tries to accept those ideas only out of maternal love. At a crucial point in her life, she is also forced by her instinctive compulsions to ponder over all the happenings and the incidents happened in her life. All of a sudden she realizes that there is no charm in life she is leading and gets back to her mother. Her mother, who also faces the same dilemma, welcomes her with open hands. Devi, full of disappointment, expectation and apprehension, opens the gate of her home in Madras, feels happy to hear the music of playing veena which her mother shelved about two decades back. With melodies in the air, Devi also notices a wild growth of the plants in the compound which her mother used to take care of and prune them timely. In her aim to achieve perfection in everything, Sita realizes that she has lost her way. The chains of society are willingly welcomed by her under the influence of culture but this is also crushing her own desires. As one awakens, the self-realization starts budding and blooming. She realizes that the strict discipline that she has imposed on Devi and plants, cannot mould them. They exhibit their true nature whenever they are at liberty. This liberty brings one to the threshold of change. Devi has her own changed notions of life. The mingling and the transfusion of the cultures are also important to note in her case. She comes back to India to her mother and later on tries to adjust in the societal expectations to play the role of good daughter and wife. The development of her character can be seen in the bold steps she takes in life but soon realizes the hollowness of her decisions. Then the self-examination takes her to her roots. Rama Nair while discussing the Prelude of the present novel writes:

Realism and fantasy interplay in the narrative to focus on the emerging self. It is a self that endures suffering, but it is a suffering that leads to self-understanding and an inward strength to break loose from past thoughts and experiences that are negative.²⁸
The decisions taken in life are under the compulsions of instincts. They create those hiatus which can be filled only through experience. Sita unknowingly becomes the spokesperson of patriarchy. The aim that she holds to is same as handed down through generations by male-dominated world. In order to handover this inheritance she loses her own identity. Looking back in her life makes her realize what she did. The self-awareness makes her conscious of her loss and her servile condition. Her dusting veena symbolizes a fresh start. A woman’s needs to be loved makes Devi break all limits of Indian women. She moves from one place to another to create her own space. She shows a radical departure from the traditionally subordinate role assigned to them. While feeling unwanted, she realizes that she is not fitting into the mould which her expectations have created. Her coming back to her mother as a purposeful, conscious being displays courage to accept life and her roots. All the three women walking on the tight rope struggle for the balance in their life. They are rooted in Indian culture and are trying to assert their individuality. While discussing Feminism Peter Barry writes:

Feminism switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. ²⁹

Hariharan has made a remarkable balance while presenting the stories of different women. Tradition, transition and progression are the three stages through which her female characters pass through. The inner struggle that they face to find a balance is portrayed authentically by the writer. The question that arises time and again in the novel is related to their freedom. Many Indian women writers now-a-days have been writing about women emancipation. They are also creating characters that can go to any limit to attain their freedom. Freedom does not merely mean sexual or economic freedom but in reality it is the space that an Indian woman wants. From the point of view of economic and social independence, she is yet to cover a long distance so that she can open new horizons for her thoughts. In creating new paths, she has to keep in her mind positive aspects of culture. Prof. R.C. Sinha regarding Indian Culture says:

The expression “Indian Culture” denotes a set of values dear to Indians. Values have two dimensions. One is spiritual and other is secular. Spiritual value is a set of goals or ideas. Secular values refer to interest, preference and choice, which are essentially changing. When we talk about Indian culture, people may consider it as Indian moral values. Values are not necessarily moral. Indian culture transcends morality on higher planes of existence. In practical realm of existence it concentrates on secular values. ³⁰
Whether it is language, religion or any other aspect, they together contribute in the making of identity. Most of the female protagonists of Githa Hariharan show the courage to face the odds of life, howsoever fragile they may be. The suffocation, restlessness and pain in the struggle of three generations are presented with daintiness. The writer has painted the seething discontentment raging within the heart as well as the sense of insecurity and isolation in the changing world. To understand the plight of woman, it is very important to take care of the trivial problems along with the larger issues of life. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has made a sharp comment:

Questions of political consciousness and self-identity are a crucial aspect of defining Third World women’s engagement with feminism. And while these questions have to be addressed at the level of organized movements, they also have to be addressed at the level of everyday life in times of revolutionary upheaval as well as in times of peace.

Hariharan in *The Thousand Faces of Night* has created characters of everyday life and with their meager problems touches upon the larger issues of gender exploitation embedded in pedagogic discourses. Devi is the central character and other equally strong women characters are explored in relation to her. These characters may appear abnormal in their behavior, but they welcome life on their own terms. With the eyes of Devi and her emotions, one comes to realize the condition of women in changing scenario. Hariharan presents a picture of real society where such characters do occur. Khushwant Singh writes about the writer, “Githa Hariharan’s world of South Indian extended family is to me more accurate than R.K. Narayan’s.”

In spite of unpleasant shadow the women protagonists are optimizing for the peaceful assimilation. Under the compulsions of their instincts they take some decisions at the early stages of their life. But they crave for fulfillment in their life. They realize that there is some lack which is the hindrance on their way to completion. At a particular stage in their life, they ponder over the situation to see where the things have gone wrong. Their experience at different stages of life fills the hiatus which drives them on the path to find the real meaning of life and fulfillment. Anyone who does not take care of this fails to assess oneself and enters a field of chaos. The problem of chaos becomes critical not only for an individual but for the whole society.

The increasing rate of suicides in the modern progressive society has given a tremendous shock to all the life loving people as it indicates the estranging sociological and psychological conditions prevailing in the society. Every individual is participating in a cross country race
swirling in the ground that reaches nowhere. The lack of emotional security and alienation in the modern progressive society other than other factors such as economic conditions, career stress etc. is the major cause for it. The present system has disintegrated the centuries old social or psychological bonding compelling everyone to look for a hiatus. In the past, one facing nostalgia or depression was given psychological solace by the near and dear ones but the present life has been taking this world to a point where all are living in isolation. In the moments of depression and stress, there is no one to take the other out of the deep cracks of psychological disorder resulting in escalating cases of suicides. In the case of women, the problems get more complicated due to their subaltern position in the patriarchal society. Jyoti Singh thus speaks:

Community is an extension of family and what goes on at the micro-level is perceptible at the macro-level. Within the family, the girls are conditioned to imbibe the virtues of care, nurturing, tolerance, compliance, adjustment and self-sacrifice. These are the virtues expected to be inculcated, by society especially by females. These very qualities become the source of the women’s exploitation. Rebellion rises within the form of conflict and often gives rise to feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, non-involvement, depression and passivity, but the female heroes learn to counter it and get over their feelings of worthlessness. Women psychologists say that when a woman learns to take care and nurture, not out of fear of society, but out of their free will, they are ready to take responsibility of their own ‘self’. This is the point at which they achieve self-validation. Self-validation cannot be achieved in isolation. It is in the community and in their relation with the community that women learn to assume their ‘voice’, to listen to themselves and empower themselves.33

In the midst of odds and chaos, Hariharan’s characters try to construct a meaningful life which is beneficial for the whole fabric of society. The search for life is an inner journey. In this inner journey, the external aspects of life do not remain untouched. Many phases come in this endless journey where one wants to take hiatus for some time. During this period, one thinks over the past life and its impressions which are deeply ingrained in mind. They reflect in the memory. These memories in reality help a person to re-emerge during one’s inner journey and also give him/her energy to face the present. This kind of thinking allows anyone to mediate between different histories and understandings of the personal. To analyze the collective differences in terms of responsibility helps in building solidarities across different generations as well as boundaries.
NOTES


(All further references in this chapter are to this book and they have been incorporated in the draft with page numbers).


