

## **Beyond Boundaries: A Reading of Githa Hariharan's Selected Texts**

**Tanvi Garg**

Ph.D. Scholar, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi

### **Abstract**

Feminism in India generally delineates solely with women issues, but Githa Hariharan is one of the contemporary Indian English writers who talk about the plight of both men and women bound by sinister rules of Indian society in one way or the other. In her works, she meticulously explores the issues that people come across, be it caste, class, gender and identity obstacles, relationships, or society. But as a relatively new writer, she stands out from other Indian authors as she is paving way for new feminism through the inclusion of genders in her works. Her focus on a blend of past with the present, mythology with modernity transcends the temporal boundaries and makes her works more relevant as a premise for the upcoming feminist theories. Devi, the protagonist in *The Thousand Faces of the Night*, finds herself torn between mythical preaching and her own needs. At the same time, Sara in *Fugitive Histories* struggles with identity and crisis, and Shiv in *The Times of Siege* is threatened by an extremist group and is able to fight it with the help of his niece, who becomes his anchor of support and strength. So, in the light of the aforementioned issues, this paper attempts to explore how in her novels Hariharan depicts the intricate relationships that various characters share with themselves and with others around them as they become their own as well as each other's support system by defying conventional rules and gender boundaries.

**Keywords:** Indian women writers, feminism, patriarchy, gender stereotypes

In Judith Butler's words:

Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities (146).

Indian society operates on hierarchical systems on multiple levels, so, in order to survive, just like a woman, even a man has to succumb to its pecking order. In Indian society, patriarchal oppression increases with the increase in the financial gap and communal conflict. And if they (men/women) fail to do what society expects them to or tries to go beyond the norms society has set for them, they are made to face the barbarity of the so-called civilized society.

The discourse of feminism in India generally focuses solely on women's issues. Many prominent and acclaimed writers such as Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Nayantara Sehgal, Gita Mehta, Manju Kapoor, and others have critically talked about the atrocities that women have been facing through decades. Indian women writers have meticulously talked about the problems women come across from almost every perspective, be it psychological, socio-cultural, or political. But not many writers have touched upon the subject of subjugation of men by the hands of patriarchy. Githa Hariharan, unlike many Indian women writers, talks about gender issues in contemporary Indian society. What makes her stand out from other writers is her vivid portrayal of a bleak image of contemporary Indian society by showing the conditions of women as well as men as they have to abide by the norms that society has set over the years. Her works contemplate the issues that people come across, be it caste, class, gender and identity obstacles, relationships by portraying characters in a realistic manner dealing with complicated issues, such as tussle between tradition and modernity, identity crisis, quest for freedom, mythology and reality, and constant conflict between East-West ideology.

One of the main challenges of Indian feminism includes women's concerns within the broad spectrum of family and community. For women in India, "Self-sacrifice and self-denial are their nobility, and their fortitude and yet they have been subject to all equities, indignities, inequality and discrimination" (Chawla). This holds when we look at how women have been treated through centuries, even if they fulfill every expectation of societal works and roles. Albeit the socio-cultural conditions for women are changing and have come a long way from what they were a few decades ago, the complete autonomy for what and how women want is still a far cry.

Hariharan has taken a different path by showing female characters bound in patriarchal structures but subverting them or emerging from them to stand up for themselves and others around them. Hariharan's novels show women characters from almost every sphere of a society stuck in familial relations and trying to find a way out. Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Sara in *Fugitive Histories* try to live up to the expectations of their respective families, but in doing so, they go deeper into their inner conflicts of breaking away from anything that ties them down. "The role of the family and community is especially pertinent to the issue of feminism in India, the conflict between 'compromise' and 'confrontation' taking center stage" (Mukhopadhyay 99). As mentioned earlier, the family has always been an important aspect when the question of an Indian woman's freedom arises. It is also evident in Hariharan's novels how difficult it is for women to

prioritize themselves over their families. Sita in *Thousand Faces of Night* is the paradigm of compromise that almost every woman goes through: compromise for her family's needs and its reputation in society, while Devi, on the other hand, stands for confrontation. Confrontation of her desires as opposed to the rules and duties that she is expected to follow. It is quite ironic that Hariharan, in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, has named her characters Sita and Devi after extremely important figures of Hindu mythology. Sita is a dutiful wife, daughter-in-law, and loving mother, just like a woman with the ideals of devotion, service, and self-sacrifice is expected to be. Even when she wants to break free from these roles, she capitulates to it to make everyone around her pleased and because the stereotypes of being an ideal woman have been deeply ingrained in her. As opposed to this, Devi, her daughter, asserts herself by taking control of her life as she runs away from a marriage that she feels is restraining her to the boundaries of her house and is also devoid of any emotions. Despite the teaching of Mayamma on how a married woman should give in to the needs of her husband and in-laws' family, Devi rebels against the ideals and chooses to be with Gopal with whom she believes she will have a meaningful relationship. She believes that Gopal is not the patriarch like her husband Mahesh, but nonetheless, she finds herself in similar male-dominated bounds. But it is in the end: she emerges as an individual who does not need a relationship to define her being as she stands up to her name 'Devi' which is the symbol of power, strength, and courage: she realizes that she is no longer a vehicle of other's ends. In Hariharan's other novel, *The Fugitive Histories*, Sara is a strong and independent woman, just like Bim in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of the Day*, but unlike Bim, Sara does not understand the meaning of her life until the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, she oscillates between her identity as a Hindu or Muslim and the horrors of the past and her current situation. She understands that if she wants to survive, she has to make space for herself in a male-driven world.

Over the years, with changes in socio-cultural scenarios, there has been a little change in women's condition. It is not polar opposites of compromise and confrontation, but there is a grey area between them where women are trying to balance both family and their individual needs: this could be seen in *In Times of Siege*. In this novel, Hariharan has shown two strong women from different generations, Meena and Rekha: both are educated but what makes them stand out is the difference with which they perceive things. They are modern women who know how and when to assert themselves. They don't compromise with their own ideals in order to blindly follow societal norms. When Shiv gets in troubled circumstances, Meena takes charge of the situation and gets him out of it. Instead of playing the role of a patriarch, Shiv listens to Meena and is inspired by her, and

since it is Meena who plays the role of a matriarch by helping through his plight, he holds her in high regard. As mentioned earlier, many Indian writers talk about feminism. Still, in doing so, they forget to consider the fact that just like women, men have also been type-casted in roles of bread-earner, protector, and so on. But Githa Hariharan, along with taking a standpoint on feminism, discusses a need to address issues that men face.

“Manhood means different things at different times to different people. We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of ‘others’ - racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women” (Kimmel 25). Men are often taught that they are superior to others- which means women (specifically) and people from lower society strata. Since Indian society works as a pyramid of hierarchies, the perfect man in this scenario is the one who belongs to the upper class, earns well, and dominates ‘others.’ But more often than not, men also stand at the receiving end of patriarchy: however, they don’t find themselves in as bad position as women, but nonetheless, they have to abide by the norms or otherwise they are treated heinously. Since there has not been many Indian writers Githa Hariharan is one such writer who showcases a real portrayal of male characters facing emotional and moral crisis at both social and personal level in present society. She has shown difference between two sets of men: materialistic and artistic: former category are men with patriarchal ideology and latter are the men who try to break and get away from the idea of toxic masculinity. Mahesh in *Thousand Faced of Night* belongs to the first category. He is a well-educated man who appears to have liberal thoughts about marriage but when it comes to reality, he is a follower of typical male centric ideals. For him, Devi’s place is in her home while he goes out for work. She should always serve her in-laws happily, without tiring or any figment of anger. Her father-in-law is also shown as a deep believer in patriarchal ideology, but his ideals are derived from mythology. He is a Sanskrit professor who still follows the old traditions of brahmin-hood and shares mythical stories with Devi where women are traditional and homely. So expects his daughter-in-law to follow the same ideas. Professor Krishna, being a poetry professor in *I Have Become the Tide*, tries to break-free from mythical and historical patriarchal ideas. He neither believes in the oppressive caste system nor in the suppression of women. As a result becomes a target of an extremist group whose ideals are not only patriarchal to the core but also misogynist, as these extremists believe that a menstruating woman should be kept at a distance, a woman’s only purpose is to beget a son or otherwise she is not fulfilling her duties and is thus condemned. Since both Devi’s father-in-law and Krishna, are in privileged positions, where on the one hand the former tries to exploit other people by using his

position as the superior male patriarch of the house, on the other hand the latter tries to educate others. In *Fugitive Histories* Bala's husband is shown as the epitome of patriarchal figure: he tamed his young bride to an extent that she chooses to stay quite all her life, for which she is also considered mentally unstable. While Asad is shown as the man with values of respecting his wife and daughter as he does not subdue anybody but rather listens to his wife in every important decision making. Samar, Asad's son, follows his father's liberal ideas and so helps his sister and checks on his mother regularly. He is the one who is shown to have a caring and tender nature as opposed to tough, insensitive image of men. Similarly, Shiv in *In Times of Siege* knows that being a man or a woman does not make anybody immune to violence or problem of any kind. His wife is an educated and wise woman, and so he looks up to her and talks to her before making any wise decision. Similarly, when his wife is not there to help him, he does not shy away from asking for help from his niece as an extremist group attacks him for publishing a new perspective on a historical period.

Where other Indian writers show their male characters either in the light of partition trauma or diasporic crisis, Hariharan depicts her male characters from different backgrounds etched in contemporary times, struggling to make or save their place in society.

Gender dimension and subordination of women and men have some foundational grounds, which is heteropatriarchy. Hariharan, in none of her works, has explored the angle of transgender issues yet. Though she has focused in great detail on issues that men and women go through, but we cannot go as far to say that her novels can be studied in light of gender as a whole concept. However, Hariharan has people from all strata of society facing unresolved problems and challenges. Her works transcend any bound of time as she uses myth and history and weaves it into present to show that situations have been quite similar for men and women since time immemorial. In every era, one has to fight for himself/herself to overcome social restraints and political complexities.

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