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Cases of Penance in Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night

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Cases of Penance in Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Approval Letter

This thesis entitled "**Cases of Penance in Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night***" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by **Mr. Navindra Khatiwada** has been approved by the undersigned members of the **Research Committee.**

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Abstract

This paper studies Githa Hariharan's picture of contemporary Indian women at social and physical level for their quest of familial stability and certainty of reconciliation in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The analysis establishes submission and surrender of fictional characters—Devi, Sita, Mayamama, outlining the areas of penance in the novel as it results in a multiple response ranging from self-inflicted suffering to protest, revenge and violence. Having passed through mythical and historical positions of women of *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Purana*, as a historical survey, penance is studied in Hariharan's novel. Finally, this work shows difference between contemporary and mythical world of women in Indian setting.

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I: Introduction

Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) is about three Indian women Devi, Sita and Maya who represent three generations and three goddesses in their name. The whole female order of the Hindu pantheon informs the lives of the protagonists as the real and mythical are combined in focusing a sustained ideal of womanhood over the ages despite the changes in individual circumstances governed by education and modernization. The Indian women's situation is similar even in the changed context.

Apurb Kundu thinks marriage as an entangling bondage which weaves Devi, the protagonist, in to the cobweb of loneliness and self-infected suffering. She points out: "Devi has the finally choose her groom, her life as a dutiful wife and its lack of choices slowly begins to oppress" (112). She has thought herself "capable of a conventional life [...] she boldly breaks chain of her conventional life; makes Devi realize the futility of her leaving [...] the braver choice" (112).

Rukum Advani regards the criticism of the novel as a shifting pervasiveness of male dominance in Indian life. She asserts, "The book shows that new spaces are being caved of [...] against all the odds [...] against all the husbands [...] and the hegemonic hostility of this culture to women's creativity" (192). Indira Nityanandam finds the main characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* playing a balancing act by wading through a tight rope. She asserts: "...not succumbing to sorrow or despair they do not commit suicide like Anita Desai's characters. Rather they prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle" (192). *The Thousand of Faces of Night* reflects the existential angst of Indian women as N. Indira comments on the book, "Hariharan in

the novel traces the battles of woman in her relationship with man and society not to urban existential angst but to times immemorial [...] passing through laceration process of identity crisis” (178).

Hariharan herself consciously makes family matters as core. She believes, “a woman writer’s gift is her own special voice. My own voice. My own voice seems right for a medley. I enjoy weaving both poetry and short stories into my novel” (63). Focusing on the prelude of *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Rama Nair claims novel as being a framework for narrative technique which encompasses novelist’s reasoning, emotions and sensations. She further states, “prelude as intense experience that my move the reader to exercise [...] perception and sensibility [...] to comprehend the world of reality more sharply and sensitively [...] than otherwise might [...] add a richness to the narrative fabric of the novel” (175).

After observing these critical responses from different scholars, it has become more relevant to make research on the issue of Devi’s survival struggle and quest for self. She wants to remain in her own essential self with desires and feelings. But her own self was thwarted and entangled in an artificial and self-deceptive world of fantasy which invites spiritual annihilation. Therefore, it becomes necessary to preserve her. To protect that self she chooses to breakout marital vows.

This research writing aims at observing Githa Hariharan’s novel on the light of myth, history and course of penance as chief motif for her characters moving towards ‘modern Indian society’ as they seek women liberalization and their own free course of living. This research will explain different theoretical and historical presence of penance in Hindu art, culture and literature as a ‘survey reflection’ that Hariharan has also explored through her mythical characters in her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

The Thousand Faces of Night is not just a woman Indian novel but it is a definite feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewrote and retold from a female point of view. The focus of this research is on the domestic lives of women, the inner spaces that they possess in various status and roles as grandmother, daughter and daughter-in-law in the very context of Hindu society.

In this research, it will also be analyzed how the female point of view differs from the male discourse especially by contrasting myths from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Purana*. Since penance is the chief path for women for their sadness and happiness in myths, history and female discourse, the fictional characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* happen to undergo penance in all three generations—grandmother, daughter and daughter-in-law.

Themes in Her Works

Grew up in Bombay and Manila, two big cities of India, Githa Hariharan studied in the United States of America and worked with public television there. Returning to India in 1979, she had worked in Bombay, Madras and New Delhi, initially as an editor in a publishing house, and later as a free spirit of novelist. She is married and lives with two sons in New Delhi. Her first book *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth prize for the best first novel. She has published a collection of stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993), and the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), and *When Dreams Travel* (1999). She has also edited *A Southern Harvest*, a volume of stories in English translation from four major South Indian languages. She is working on a book of children's stories, *The Willing Team and Sorry Best Friend*. Her latest novel is *In Times of Siege*, a response to the ugly, yet complicated, feet of communalism.

In her latest novel *In Times of Siege*, she describes a scenario as a ‘political novel’. History Professor Shiv Murthy’s sedate and peaceful life revolves around lesson modules he prepares for the Bachelors Degree history students in the distance education mode, his routine meetings in the department, his occasional furtive and desultory affairs with colleague Amita Sen as an escape from his routine continue conjugal life with his wife Rekha and his daughter who has recently taken up a job. There is his Department Head, Dr. Sharma who is against all controversies and believes in the ‘consensual’ approach to things. Into this world comes Meena, the daughter of Sumathi, a friend of the Murthys. Meena, a student in the university where Shiv teaches, has a broken leg injury and is taken to the Murthy household. Rekha is away and in nursing Meena, Shiva is helped by Kamala, the domestic help and Babilil, her daughter. A woman of the younger generation, Meena’s worldview is shaped by racial texts such as *The Politics of Hate*, *Onward United Action*, *Women’s Voices* and *The Communalist Agenda*. She also is a fan of *Asterix and the Normans* and *Tintin*. She likes to champion political cause through posters campaigns, “sit ins” and demonstrations. As Shiva struggles to make sense of the ranging political turmoil, he also attempts to come to terms with personal crisis, “his incomplete part, his fears and his obsession with a woman who will give him strength he seeks” (95). So, this novel’s central importance lies on all the times especially the role of conscientious individual against the rising tide of communalism, intolerance and bigotry. Sumitra Senpathy, regarding the Githa Hariharan’s proficient ability for strong telling, says:

In Time of Siege is a passionate narrative of New Delhi in the year 2000 and promises its share of irony, humor, intrigue and relationship. A man in his fifties lusting over a young politically committed woman, twists, turns and revelations make the plot intriguing. All along, the

train seems to chug along the tracks, gently swaying and rocking, as its wheels seem to roll beneath our feet, trying to keep pace with the melodies of the crooner from Texas. (5)

—There are three women in Murthy's life like the three women in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Wife Rekha believes nothing can go wrong so long as her house and green are well tended. However, in *The Thousand faces of Night*, stories of Sita, Devi and Mayamama revolt round the family and mythical levels. In an interview with Gowri Ramnarayan, Githa says, "As a writer, I am not interested in people who are full of certainties. In my books I have alternately used male and female voices. But both voices I have used in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *In Times of Siege* transcend gender—they aren't clichéd males full of certainties." Shobhana Bhattacharji, at one point shows a high competition among Salman Rushdie's *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Hariharan's *The Thousand Face of Night*. She writes, "The suspense was over. As mere observer, we felt sorry of Rushdie. It must be difficult to live with this publicity. Whatever the man does is reported as controversy." However, in the 13 years of the prize, only four Indians have made it the final stage: Vikram Chandra, Githa Hariharan, Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Setha.

This novel concentrates on a story of Hindu society in which, Devi, the protagonist, spends a long time in her course of study in America and assimilates with the culture abroad. Upon her arrival to her hometown in Madras, a Metropolis of India; Sita, her mother, arranges her marriage with Mahesh, a regional manager of a multinational company that makes detergent and toothpaste. But she finds herself confined in a male-ridden world, and realizes her Western education and culture have not made her strong to fulfill her desires of love, life and sex in this world. To escape

this, she flirts with Gopal, a singer. Again, she is not happy. “When she was awarded the common wealth prize for the best first novel,” David Morgan write, “that tact acted like a kind of recommendation for me to pick the novel up. The curiosity soon turned into surprise as it was difficult for me to plough the chaotic nature of the novel. Rather than being called *The Thousand Faces of Night*, it should have been called ‘The Thousand Thoughts of Githa Hariharan’. Well, I have not counted [...] the way the story is told, which in fact is a pity as it could have been a very good novel” (13).

Hariharan is one of the finest English writers of India today. Her explorations of an individual’s situation in contemporary Indian society are sensitive and subtle, the style is elegant. She has minutely studied the plight of Indian women and in nation and abroad. Her themes and subject matters are different but unique. With an interview with Githa Hariharan, Sumitra Senpathy, a journalist mentions, “Githa declared that she was not a sociologist, a historian or an academic. It was primarily as a novelist that she was responding to serious political issues such as the demolition of Babri Masjid and Gujart Carnage in *In Times of Siege* whereas through the stories of Devi, Sita and Mayamma in *The Thousand Faces of Night* brings alive the underworld of Indian women’s lives—whether most dreams are broken and kept in memory of young woman.”

In the last two decades, Indian woman’s literature in English has bloomed not just in terms of fresh writing but also into the unearthing of forgotten and ignored earlier works. Rajeswari Sundar Rajan writes of “The Heroines’ Progress” in the works of Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Manjula Padmanabhan. “Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*”, as Rajan puts it, “is so compelling realistic that no Indian woman [can read it] without a steady sympathetic identification and, indeed, frequent shocks of recognition, but where has Deshpande gone from there? There is

little to distinguish her works of the 1990s from that of the 1980s. Her protagonists, just like Devi, the heroine of Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, are entirely lacking in the ability to innovate or subvert. Devi, in fact, seems willfully to close the door her life has opened for her." Githa Hariharan, having educated in America and having learnt Western values like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Geeta Dharmarajan and Bharati Mukherjee, writes about different women of Indian society. In her novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi, the central figure, is an educated and Westernized Indian woman but her desires are unfulfilled in the modern Indian life. Her chosen world as she returns from America gets more complicated as she seeks to go alone in her life. Gradually her life turns from one mishap to growing nightmare. She finds her world full of myth, history, and love and penance. Praising the positive aspects of novel, Andrea Caron Kempf mentions in a literary journal:

The only times Githa Hariharan's Devi exhibits any firmness of mind is when she gets into and out of senseless relationships—once with Dan and the next time with Gopal. Both relationships are doomed to be nothing other than temporary answers to the dilemma which Devi faces in her life—dilemma of not knowing what to do with it. (25)

Githa Hariharan, in her latest novel *In Times of Siege*, explores the many facets of fanaticism through the story of an academic professor suddenly finding in a situation where long-held beliefs are under fire and he is forced to make difficult choices. But, the story and theme of her first novel is different. In a question of Urvashi Butalia, Githa Hariharan says, "I've used myths to help examine contemporary women's lives—to suggest that they might help to understand their lives, which on the surface seem rather placid and devoid of events" (55).

The novel is remarkable for its elemental things of life such as a love and death, women and men, story and myth, passion and loneliness, The three women—Devi, Sita and Mayamma—stand for three generations and their plights in a Hindu society. Jack K. Higgins makes a review, “Each of them has their own story to tell—Devi, the daughter, educated in American, married to the pompous Mahesh; Sita, the mother, sacrificing herself to the gods of reason, order and progress, and Mayamma, the old servant, married when still a girl to a drunken husband and abused by her husband, her mother-in-law and her son.” With a theme on gender pressure, Lotta Strandberg writes:

Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame* (1982) reflects the history of Pakistan, which Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) links her story to mythological materials of the Sanskrit tradition. Both novels consist of two intervening “tracks”; one containing the plot as we see as on the historical and mythological undercurrent. (2)

This novel is structured around the sexual and mental experience of Devi, Mayamma and Sita, and their situation, often paralleling the past with present, womanhood with manhood and symbolic transformation with mythological goddesses. Rama Nair writes, “The novel moves on to arrive at varying levels of intellectual self-realization which enable the characters to either attain liberation or reconciliation through self knowledge (31).”

II: Feminism and Hindu Myth

Concept of Penance in Hindu Society

The term 'penance' refers to the spiritual practice which is an art of self-mortification or devotion performed voluntarily to show sorrow for a sin or other wrongdoing. This term is derived from the Latin word *poenitentia* and its English meaning is repentance of sins. However, in sacramental understanding the term, 'penance' applies to the whole activity from confession to absolution. It is used to characterize the works of satisfaction imposed or recommended by the present on or to the penitent. Traditionally, penance has been viewed as a punishment, as the Latin *poena*, the root of pen (it) ance, means punishment, and applies variety in both eastern and Western religious societies. Old forms of penance still include prayers, while corporeal punishments, such as the wearing of cilice and public humiliations have become rare, even in monastic practice. More recently, taking in an account the insights of pastoral theology, penance has tended to move towards the acts that positively or negatively reinforce the penitent's behaviour.

The concept of penance has been widely practised in Hindu culture. As is told in *The Ramayana*, in the context of Sage Viswamitra approaching Dasaratha to send Rama with him to protect his sacrifice, the sage mentioned that just as desire and anger raised their ugly heads where a person understood penance, his sacrifice was disturbed by two demons, Maricha and Subahu. *The Mahabharata*, on the other hand, illustrates this through the portrayal of Arjuna's character. He who had sported with maidens and married Subhadra when he went on a pilgrimage soon after the Pandava's marriage to Draupadi could also exercise absolute restraint over himself when he wanted. The practice of penance is not only limited in old and modern oriental texts but also spread in occidental texts. Carl T. Jackson writes, "The first

Indian to successfully promote Hinduism and concept of penance in America was Swami Vivekananda, who represented Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He went on to establish Vedanta Societies in major American societies, teaching a variety of Hinduism that emphasizes social reform, self realization, religious tolerance and the unity of Self (*atman*) and Absolute (*Brahman*)” (87).

Religion, Gender Pressure and Hindu Literature

The 1980s was the era known for myth-busting in South Asian literature. Indian feminists began to step out of shadows and rewrote mythology, which was written by men. This was and is necessary because male discourse elides women, makes them invisible. Patriarchal myths have the function to infantilize women. As a result women have to write themselves into discourses. A central aspect here is the revisionist re-making of mythology from a female point of view. If history and politics are male discourses mythology becomes a female domain. The wave of the Indian feminist agenda has worked with Indian myths as a portrait in epics, which divide into the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, in order to revision women's status and role in these traditional tales. It is in historicizing this dominant myth of Indian womanhood that one may hope to understand the multitudinous ways it serves patriarchy in both its local and global manifestations. Caste and class interests are also, of course, serviced by the myth. So it gets clear that the men made myths of Indian womanhood had to be taken out of men's hand, who had used them as another instrument to support their patriarchal ideals.

The female discourse in the post-80s deals especially with “feminist ideology [by issuing] gender injustice and the changing role of women in Indian society”

(Vijayasree 44). As Vijayasree reflects Adrienne Rich's words revisionist retelling of the past is not just an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, not it is more than that, namely it is an act of survival" (46) for Indian women. Revisioning myths is a method of emancipation by which tradition gets reinvented and man made laws are subverted.

The creation of women, their social status and their perspective roles in fictional writings of both Asian and non-Asian literature have been shaped by myths and religions. As Hindu religion follows, there is a charming myth associated with the creation of women by Brahma, the Supreme Creator. Like the creation of Adam and Eve, the first people, in Biblical world, Brahma wished to give man a companion, the woman, saying, "She will serve you lifelong and if you cannot live with her, neither can you live without her", (*Purana* 34). Both primordial myths of Hinduism and Christianity indicate that woman is either an 'after thought' of a male God or a play-mate created for man as a psychic compensation for his innate loneliness. The whole female order of the Hindu pantheon focuses a sustained ideal of womanhood despite the changes in individual circumstances in the changed context.

The world popular oriental epics, *The Ramayana* by Valmiki and *The Mahabharata* by Vyasdev, both by men, have been written around two central characters; Sita and Draupadi, both women. The key role of women played in literature and life in the past and present in both parts of the globe—the east and the west—are equally significant. Identity and social positions of women was based on the ancient myths, legends, which are created as per the male taste.

In a patriarchal dominant society like India, it is uncommon to see women, pitted against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against themselves, resulting in self-inflicted wounds and penance. This is a factor of the realization of the

impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliation on them. This is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the *Mahabharata*. As the story goes, Gandhari was given in marriage to the prince of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra; initially she was much impressed by the refinement of culture and riches of the people of Hastinapur on her arrival with her bridal entourage. It was only much later that she realized that she was married to a blind man. In her pride, in her anger, without uttering a word, she tore off a piece of her cloth and tied it tightly over her eyes. While driving home the point of penance on the part of Gandhari, Iravati Karve recreates the situation of Dhritarashtra pleading with Gandhari to give up her posture of penance as they near the end of their lives:

You feel, Gandhari, that you have been cheated and deceived, but think of for a moment; in the three generations of our family every person has been cheated and deceived. I am pleading you not merely to ask for forgiveness but to persuade you to give up your fight against life. Give up your anger, not only against me, but against life itself. My injustice to you does not give you the right to do an injustice to your children, to your whole life. How can one wrong compensate another, Gandhari?

(35)

Gandhari eventually relents only to guide him to the engulfing flames in yet another form of self-sacrifice and penance.

Another figure in *The Mahabharata* who could be regarded as the very incarnation of penance is Amba. When Bhishma went to Kashi he heard of a Swayamvara at the King's palace. He had already taken a vow of celibacy but went to the palace and just as the eldest of the princesses, Amba, held out her hand for the king of Salwa, Bhishma abducted all the three for his step-brother, Vichitravirya.

When they reach Hastinapur, Amba pleads with him to let her go and marry a man of her choice. Bhishma lets her go but the king of Salwa rejects her saying that it was Bhishma who had a rightful claim over her as he had won them all in the Swayamvara. Amba returns to Hastinapur and pleads with Bhishma. She takes offence and with the burning desire of taking revenge on Bhishma she goes to the forest to perform penance. Shiva, pleased with her penance, touched her garland and promised her that whoever wore it and fought Bhishma in a battle would be able to kill him. Amba then searches for a king who would wear it but finds none. Dejected she throws the garland over a pillar in the court of Draupada and goes to the forest again and burns herself. But the hatred still lived on and she was reborn as Shikhandi to Draupadi. When the Kurukshetra war broke out he strode confidently forward along the war-field to taste a long awaited victory born of penance.

Sita, as also described later in the fictions of Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, absorbs all inflicted misery and humiliation of the male ego whereas Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence. Sita accepts, accommodates and with draws. Draupadi, on the contrary, rejects and involves herself in the process of life as a protagonist. These two female archetypes define the limits of female experience in reality, especially the Indian reality. The mythical world of Indian goddesses—Sita, Draupadi, Kali, Devi—has become a narrative designs, patterns of actions, character-types, themes and harmony in the traditional texts from Rabindra Nath Tagore, the Nobel laureate in literature to Kiran Desai, perhaps the youngest woman novelist of present India.

Indian Women's Fiction and Myth

The literary creativity of women writers in Indian English fictions, after 1970s, has appeared in big volume of texts. Having educated in home and abroad

many women writers have mixed Indian subject matter as the source of writing in western style. Demonstrating that fictional creation is no male territory, the female writers have evaluated the diverse and inter-related aspects of women fictions—which are full of Indian stories, myth, legends and women sufferings.

Githa Hariharan explores individuals' situation in her contemporary Indian society as full of myths and legends. Her fictions—*The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Art of Dying*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *When Dream Travels*—present fictional characters in mythical world, seeking personal freedom, rights and marital bliss, mainly in the lives of female characters. The domain of Hariharan's mythical world is the Hindu religion in which the readers no longer believe. Like the myths of Christian world, for instance, the myths of Jupiter, Adam and Eve, she draws her fictional characters with Hindu mythical connotation and happening. And such stories create very powerful impacts on the lives of protagonists. As in reading biblical history, Hariharan's supernatural tales from Hindu holy books sharpen the understanding of characters differently. Writing from the Indian Diaspora, of mythical themes, includes some female veterans—Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Bapsi Sidhwa, who have been writing for two decades and other contemporary are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*Sister of My Heart*), Anjana Appachana (*Listening Now*), Kiran Desai (*Hullabaloo*, *The Inheritance of Loss*), Bharati Kirchner (*Sharmila's Book*), Sujata Massey (*The Flower Master*), Indira Ganesan (*Inheritance*) and Shauna Singh (*Baldwin*).

Shashi Deshpande, through her writing, attacks the image of woman created by men and myth. "Myths that form such a longer part of a women's psyche and self-image", she says, "have themselves been created by men to fulfill their needs—the eternal child, the self-sacrificing mother, the chaste partner, the temptress and, finally,

the goddess” (47). Deshpande proposes that the biggest problem for women was their lack of confidence in themselves and what they had to say.

Unlike such women’s saying, Rabindra Nath Tagore in *Shakti* symbolizes women as “divine female energy giving life and sustaining the world” (65). In his famous novel *Ghare-baire*, he presents Bimala, female protagonist as an embodiment of Indian patriotism. However, the present texts produced by Indian women authors have re-evaluated women’s identity and position, much better than as narrated in ancient texts.

III: Cases of Penance in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Penance of Thousand Indian Women

The decade of 1970s became a fertile time for many Indian women writers writing novels in English. After most effective writing of Kamala Markanday, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai appeared Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta and Bharati Mukherjee. Another twenty years also brought an abundant growth of novels by women writers. In fact, it was the generation of Indian women who have western education and Indian subject matters in their writing. One of the new writers of this generation is Githa Hariharan whose *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the 1993 Commonwealth Prize for the best novel from the Eurasian region. Khushwant Singh, a popular writer of India, praises the work of Hariharan as ‘her world of a South India extended family is to me more accurate than R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide*.’” This novel is about Indian women, Devi, Sita and Mayama and the whole book deals with their lives, their suffering and course of penance that they undergo for personal and social freedom.

The Thousand Faces of Night by Githa Hariharan is rich in myths and legends of Hindu religion. In a way, the novel explores cases of penance, in its myriad forms, in the lives of Indian women both in physical and mental levels. And this section of research will establish submission and surrender of fictional characters outlining the areas of penance. These characters, no matter, born and brought up in Indian culture, pass their lives along with traditions, rituals and practices in which they never feel comfort. They worship Hindu gods, undergo to self torture to attend physical and spiritual happiness. Here is the link between present Indian society and the Hindu mythical world.

To begin the novel, Githa Hariharan cites the words of Devara Dasimayya from *Vachana* for the same link as:

Suppose you cut a tall bamboo
 Into 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 Ramanatha?

(*The Thousand VI*)

The 'Prelude' to the novel creates background of symbolic names, time-shift and use of myths and mythical worlds at wider levels of women characters. As it is seen at the very beginning of the novel that, Devi, the central character, becomes 'Devi'-neither male nor female-but a self in quest of self-hood and freedom through the network of old stories. She stands for *sakti*, *prakriti* and *maya*. For her natural power of giving offspring, bone rooted love to her children and her eternal love to family give these qualities to a woman. Some Hindu myths state that the male gods are entirely dependent on Devi for their strength and power, and if she withdraws her power, they are impotent and helpless. Regarding this issue, Devi, symbolically and mythically, both at physical and spiritual level, is considered as *sakti*. The course of women passing in these stages varies in different levels. To achieve the apex of happiness and freedom life, like the women of modern India, the fictional women

carry out various forms of worships. In ground reality, they face challenges living in mother's and husband's houses. Devi, studying two years in America, feels herself close to Western culture. She does not like to come back to India. But several requests and letters of her mother, Sita, force her to come back to home town and it was her duty as a daughter. It is Hindu culture that defines role and position of a woman. She obeys her mother and prepares to come back. This time gives her a pain of missing both American freedom and romance with Dan, her university boyfriend. Hariharan writes:

Devi's last day in America, promised to Dan, found her in a state of hectic euphoria. Dan was waiting for her at an open air café, the Hasselbald that followed him around like a faithful dog lying on the chair next to him. He took photographs of her wherever they went. [...] She looked at his hair, at the millions of tightly-wound springs of black wool that never failed to take her by surprise. (2-3)

Wondering in American cities with Dan, and doing English studies among international students, Devi has grown up herself as a distinct lady. She has a "region of fantasy, because Dan is gentle, charming and determined" (3). Nevertheless, it becomes "half-made promises in the dark shadows of parking lot" and Devi feels as if her "dream was shattered" (3) when she has the pain of home coming. In this nostalgic mood, Devi finds an image of Lord Krishna in Dan. She says:

For the first time, the image struck Devi as almost grotesque: a grown man, practically naked, wearing a perpetual baby-mask. 'That's Krishna, the dark god who loved milk, butter and women'. [...] But what exactly he made of it Devi never guessed, because one month

later, close to graduation time, he had asked her to marry him. She saw that this was the logical outcome of the last few months. (5)

Her individual freedom and understanding bring a sharp contrast very soon. As she is waiting at airport, she feel her “American years slip away from her shoulders and trip her up in dark, stagnant puddles around her feet. The brief drama was over” (11). No sooner she finds herself in Indian home land, she merges into networks of childhood, grown up and future martial days.

Religion and culture in Hindu society, especially in typical Bombay setting of this novel, create a boundary for us to know who we are and what we are doing. For Devi and Sita, in their society, the family prestige is associated with how society perceives them. The fear of blasphemy or restrictions of daughter in Hindu society, if compared to openness culture of westerners, is strongly felt in:

They no longer asked me questions; I had only to listen. With her mother’s wisdom, Amma proved to them that she had not made a mistake in sending a young, unmarried girl to America. ‘your daughter will be lost to you, Sita’—they had shaken their heads and followed up their prediction with illustrative stories of boys and girls who never came back , married Americans, and forgot their ageing parents in India. (14)

Home-coming of Devi leads her into new dimension of her life, from where she starts seeing differences of culture, lives, and whole course of living. She asks herself: “Why did I come back? I am not sure. Perhaps, it is still too soon for me to understand” (16)). Wearing beautiful sari and right jewels, she agrees to be a suitable bridge in *Swayamvara*, and soon laments “Amma played her next card” (16), perhaps, her mother completes her religious karma of her daughter rearing, caring and

arranging marriage to a suit. It is this stage where Devi sees the net work of her childhood and mature life in relation to Hindu myths and modern Indian women reality of living in the discourse of penance.

The basic theme of penance and survival, in the life of woman, is introduced in these lines of prelude:

When I once asked my husband's housekeeper, old Mayamma, why she had put up with her life, she laughed till the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks. 'I can see that you are still a child,' she said. 'When I lost my first baby, conceived after ten years of longing and fear, I screamed, for the only time in my life, why? [...] A woman must learn to bear some pain, he mumbled. What can I do about the sins of your previous birth? (vii)

In the novel, the mythological stories are told by the grandmother of the protagonist, Devi, when she was a child. In response to the curious child's questions about the conditions of the women around them, the grandmother usually narrated a story appropriate to the occasion instead of giving a direct reply. The parallels and mythological equivalents had a profound impact on the mind of Devi. She says:

My grandmother's domain, the ritual in which she encased our arrivals and departures, our visits to relatives or the village temple, was more ambiguous. It was also richer, irresistible, and through her I fell in love with the go-like heroes and heroines whose stories were as real, more real, to her than our own". (26)

Teaching culture and tradition through her myths or stories, her grandmother gave her a mental "house crowded with superhuman warriors, men and women and women destined to lead heroic life" (27). Though Devi did not have any interest in her later

days to hear grandmother's "syrupy stories", it was a sort of compulsion to her to stay with grandmother.

The story of Gandhari was narrated to Devi when she inquired about the *veena* in her mother's photograph. When Sita, Devi's mother, came to the house of her in-laws, she had brought a veena with her and used to play on it when she found leisure. Her father-in-law once admonishes her for neglecting her duties and questions whether she was really a wife and a daughter-in-law. In the extended Hindu family, a bride's position is primarily that of a daughter-in-law and not that of a wife. Sita hung her head over the veena for a while and then pulled the strings out of the wooden base. This, the grandmother tells Devi, was an act of penance on her part of Sita that reminds one of the postures adopted by Gandhari in drying her eyes over with a piece of cloth. Sita never touched veena from that day onwards and devoted all her energies and intellect in making her husband a success in his professional life. Thoroughly 'exorcised' by the words of her father-in-law, she came to believe only in "order, reason, and progress" (26). She gave impression of a woman who "hated all illusions" (105). With her immense self-confidence, she donned the role of the savior of the family prestige and fortunes.

Having heard many stories from grandmother in her childhood days, Devi is well prepared for a life. She developed a mechanism of self-defense against any onslaught, from the other side, and having listened to the story of Gandhari, she says:

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.

(29)

To her, at several instances, the divine anger was understandable that would make heroism possible. She wonders how human anger could take so many clinical, pungent forms: “The lesson that was more difficult to digest was human anger; that it could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life” (29).

Devi could at the same time see “the fine cracks in bridges” her grandmother built between the stories she loved, and “the less self-contained, more sordid stories” (31) that were unfolding before her. She perceives them as “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” (31). She asked her grandmother about the fate of Gauri and was promptly told the story of a mythical lady who was married to a serpent and yet led the life of bliss.

When Devi enquired about the short-lived marital life of Uma, the grandmother narrated the story of Amba. The mythical stories became so much a part of her life that Devi thought she was the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. If at all she was wronged, she thought, she would not take it lying down but instead, she would be the mythical Devi like avenger. All the same she thought she was beyond the happenings that took place in the lives of the people around her.

The dream-like life of Devi comes to an end when she is married off to Mahesh after her return from America. Mahesh had everything a young lady could hope for: an executive job, a mansion in Bangalore and enormous riches. But the cold and indifferent attitude of the husband was more than she could suffer. She had heard many stories of harassment at the hands of husbands, but she was not prepared for this kind of treatment from her husband. Devi feels cheated like Gandhari, slighted like

Amba and suffers like the snake-woman. The new life is in sharp contrast with her previous life when the indulgence of her mother provided the much-needed emotional sustenance for her. In fact, when faced with a choice of staying back in America and returning to India she was clear in her priorities and despite the entreaties of her boyfriend there, Dan, she decides to come back to their home in Madras and finds herself 'in a cocoon her mother has firmly woven.' Sita's identification with her daughter and her dreams of a bright future must be viewed in the context of the Indian family system. Commenting on the psychological implications of mother-daughter identification, Sudhir Kakar writes, "In her daughter, the mother can re-experience herself as a child for girl and in Indian society, a daughter is considered a guest in her natal family, treated with the solicitous concern often accorded to welcome outsider, who all too soon, will marry and leave her mother for good. Mindful of her daughter's developmental fate, the mother re-experiences the emotional conflicts fate, the mother re-experiences the emotional conflicts her own separation once aroused, and this in turn tends to increase her indulgence and solicitude towards her daughter." It is this constant indulgence that Devi misses in her married life and the subconscious feeling to turn back to her mother for emotional sustenance prominently guides her future actions.

Mahesh was brought up in a family atmosphere that considers the role of a wife as being confined to the house with non-interference even in the activities and business of the males. Devi has her old father-in-law and Mayamma to keep her company. She seeks solace in the presence of her father-in-law who was a Sanskrit scholar and offers words of wisdom steeped in tradition. He often tells her about the roles of woman in a household. He tells her: "The woman has no independent

sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honored in the heavens” (57).

Devi considers the total neglect and indifference resulting to ultimate insult to her on Mahesh’s part. He goes on long tours and for business purpose for weeks leaving Devi behind alone. Devi confesses her-self that her education has left her “unprepared for the vast yawning middle chapters” of her life (54). Mahesh could not understand her feelings and thinks that she was, after all, leading a contented life with the comforts at her disposal. He teases her once thus: “why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth... then I won’t have to make a living at all” (54). More than his long absences it is his coldness that leaves Devi utterly dejected. Devi’s urge for a strong sense of revenge is manifested in different forms. She grows wild in her fantasies and seeks an escape in her weird imaginings: “I will grow a garden of weeds, those single-minded, wild, common-blooded weeds that plunge their tenacious roots deep, deep into the helpless soil” (58).

Devi’s penance takes multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She feels suffocated in the atmosphere and plans definite means of escape. But being a sensitive child brought up in a disciplined atmosphere she has her own inhibitions about open action. The traumatic experience forces her to think of the possible means of revenge:

In my walling 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. (95)

Devi experiments with some painting classes for a brief while but the snobbery there puts her off. By this time, the visits of Mahesh grow more frequent and much longer. “The routine of survival-violence” (58) becomes unbearable for Devi. Having listened to the stories of her grandmother she was prepared for a crude, oppressive onslaught. She recalls from her knowledge of mythology images of suffering and revenge: “I read about Kritiya, a ferocious woman who haunts and destroys the house in which women are insulted...each age has its Kritiya. In age of Kali, I read, each household shelters a Kritiya.” The “early rites of initiation” (54) left her unprepared for the subtler forms of exploitation. She broods: ‘instead the knife draws a drop at a time, the games it plays with men are ignominious.’ Devi accepts penance as an inevitable part of a woman’s life: “That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance (67).

Devi thinks that she presents in herself a particular version of the heroines she had grown up with: “I had, of course, to respond to my grandmother’s years of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment with a story of my own” (40). The notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women victims. Devi had the immediate example of her mother-in-law whose story was told by Mayamma. She was beautiful and was full of poise and charm. But without informing anyone, she walked out for no plausible reason. Baba accepted it with his usual stoic indifference and asked Mayamma to carry on the household business as usual as if nothing had happened. Devi could immediately identify herself in the story of her mother-in-law; “Had she misread Baba’s stories? Or had she turned them upside down and taken the contradictions, the philosophical paradoxes to their logical conclusion?” (64).

Devi informs her husband that she had intimate affairs with five of her boy friends before marriage apart from the amorous relationship with Dan in America to hurt his ego. Mahesh brushes it aside which accentuates her inner turmoil all the more. She obviously searches for more pungent forms of revenge. She derives satisfaction in not being able to carry children for Mahesh. She considers it a powerful enough weapon to be hurled against him. Childlessness, she feels, was the price she had to pay as penance for her marriage with Mahesh.

The experiences of the women Devi comes across and hears about provide only a framework of penance, protest and suffering inflicted by a male-dominated society. Even for the extremity of childlessness, Devi finds solace in the story of Mayamma, the old house-keeper in Mahesh's house. She narrates to Devi her tale of tears and traumatic experiences and how she came to be attached to the family of Parvatamma. She was married off at a young age to a ruthless man who "grew a little more crooked everyday" (80) after marriage. He was interested only in devouring her body while her mother-in-law was keen on having many grandchildren. As she did not bear children for over a year she became the object of ridicule and the consternation of family members. A woman is always looked down upon if she does not bear children for a long time. Motherhood provides redemptive factor for a woman in the Indian context. Sudhir Kakar analyzes the socio-psychological implications of the situation:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or region, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows the motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into

childhood, especially if the child is son is both a certification and redemption. (78)

Mayamma's mother-in-law advised her to do penance to change the course of the horoscope. Mayamma, at this, "invited penance as an old friend" (80). She prayed, made vows and dipped herself at four in the morning while starving every other day. Ten years of penance, she thought, bore fruit as she was blessed with a son on an auspicious day. But her hopes were short-lived. The child grows into a wastrel son who was no better than his father. At fourteen, he forced his mother to part with her diamond earring by beating her. But he suddenly fell ill and died after prolonged illness.

With so many examples and stories of penance before her, Devi finally decides to move out of the house of Mahesh "seeking a goddess who is not yet made" (95). The act of walking out on Mahesh provides substance to her life and she considers it her first real journey. This has another dimension too. When she elopes with Gopal, a Hindustani classical singer and an occasional visitor to her neighborhood, she knew she would not be happy with him. It is an act of new turn in her conjugal life, of protest against Mahesh and against her own self. As she herself predicts, the affair with Gopal proves to be short one. He is a flirt with aspirations for an aristocratic way of life. Devi gets disillusioned with him and moves once again. This time she thinks she was certainly "no longer on the run." Her life has come full circle with Devi choosing to come back to her mother to begin her life afresh: "To stay and fight, to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning" (139).

As Devi enters her mother's house in Madras, she hears the faint sounds of veena, "hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house" (139). Her mother knew

that Devi would ultimately come to her and was prepared to receive her as she comes out with her real self by retrieving the long-forsaken veena and by identifying with her daughter.

The areas of outward confrontation as depicted in the novel are very few. From the point of Devi's return from America, the narrative is filtered through the consciousness of the protagonist. Her mental states rather than actual events occupy the centre-stage and the conflicts, having been internalized, result in psychological aggression and violence. The mythical dimension informs and enforces the crisis of identity in the context of the divergent forces stultifying the female ego. In this agonizing and violent internal conflict of Devi that forms the essence of the theme, the attendant motifs and stories work at various levels to enable the essentially assertive individual think of myriad forms of revenge. Devi's modest ambition of making it good in her life is thwarted by the indifferent attitude of Mahesh in the first instance and later by the fidelity of Gopal, the two dimensions of oppressive male ego. 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.

Penance and Search for Women's Identity

A foreign-returned young girl Devi, her artistically-inclined mother Sita and an old caretaker Mayamma, in Githa Hariharan's novel successfully, juxtapose and intermingled the lives of these three women characters to present a picture of the multi-faceted Indian woman. Mayamma, the old caretaker-cum-governess-cum-cook

at Mahesh's house, lived all her life trying to satisfy others. Married at twelve to a useless ambler who came to her every night, "his large hairy thighs rough and heaving on her," she knew no happiness in marriage. When two years of marriage brought forth no child, she incurred the wrath other mother-in-law, did penance to change the course of her life, invoke the names of all the gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon till she finally gave birth to a male child. Eight years later, her husband worn into middle age, with dissipated excess, disappeared taking with him all the money in the house though Mayamma never saw him again, she found his replica in their son. A wastrel from birth, he threatened and cursed and even beat his mother till he finally caught a fever and died: "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" (82). On that day leaving behind her home forever, Mayamma came to Parvatiamma's—Mahesh's mother's—house and stayed on to tend to the kitchen and family.

In spite of her own difficult and painful life, in spite of knowing no happiness with her husband and son, Mayamma is able to be a bed-rock to this family. Githa Hariharan here indicates the innate strength of the women who are able to bounce back to normal in spite of all her tragedies. Mahesh, however, is able to neither see nor appreciate the enormity of her suffering. In a very off-hand manner he brushes it off. "Those days are gone and there's no point listening to all her stories about them" (82).

The novelist uses the technique of juxtaposing the past with the present when the life of the lonely Mayamma—after Devi had left and Mahesh was on tour—is interspersed with her recollections of her past to provide us with an insight into her battered, violence-filled existence. While her husband called her "a shameless hussy"

(111) and kicked her “after a night of whoring in the rain” (111) her mother-in-law fed her yesterday’s rice because “what is the use of feeding a barren woman” (112) and “smear the burning red, freshly ground spices into my barrenness” (113) because she was found admiring her new saree. Later she asked her to cut her breast open and “take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam in order to propitiate the gods so as to beget a son” (113). Yet Mayamma never once questioned these atrocities, never raised a voice or a finger or tried to run away from this living hell. To her generation of Indian women, life meant merely accepting one’s fate without as much as a murmur or whimper. According to Devi: “Mayamma had been thrown into the waters of her womanhood well before she had learnt to swim. She had learnt about lust, the potential of unhidden bestial cruelty, first hand [...] she snarls and sulks [...] but she has no bitterness” (135). She made no choices in her own life but yet lived through other women like Parvatamma and later even Devi. In approving of Parvatamma’s decision to leave her home and family and go in search of the meaning of life, she shows a surprising and indefatigable strength. She holds the family together then and continues to care for Mahesh and his house even when Devi walks out on them. Her life and experiences are totally different from those of Sita who was probably born just fifteen years after Mayamma.

We first see Sita as a cool, self-confident, middle-aged woman welcoming her daughter back from the US. She played every move with dexterity like a “veteran chess player,” (14) answered every question with “expert counters attacks” (14) and after a month of Devi’s return to India prepared for her Swayamvara “with the same eloquent hand” (16). She invited all her relatives to be part of the marriage arrangements, “listened to every bit of advice as if she had never heard it before, then did exactly what she wanted” (23). It is this same calm, cool and confident Sita who

had earlier “embraced her destiny” (29) and snapped “in a discordant twang of protest” (30) the strings of her veena which she could play to perfection in “rapturous flight” (30) because she decided to choose the role ordained by centuries of social convention—that of a wife and daughter-in-law. Having broken the demands of her music and her veena which “was a singularly jealous lover,” (103) Sita had only one straight path to tread-wifedom and later motherhood. Having “cut herself off from the clandestine line” (103) of years of practice and sadhana of music, she took her husband “by the 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” (104). Sita shaped her husband and daughter exactly as she wanted even though she was disappointed to see Devi grow up into “an awkward thin acne-ridden, stammering adolescent” (105). As she hated any illusion, “she had seized it firmly by its roots and pulled it out of her soul “ (105) and even banished Devi’s phantom gods and goddesses to their rightful place for now “her god rode the most practical, the most tangible of chargers” (105). Everything about her and her house was orderly and well-pruned and she “banned from her mind from trading in memories, confessions, judgments, the what-could have been” (107). Her husband Mahadevan’s sudden death while on a posting in Africa is met with the same stoic acceptance and having burnt his body and papers there, she comes back to Madras. In an organized fashion, she managed to draw her daughter back from America, indulged a few of her tantrums, and then had her married to Mahesh and “packed and dispatched to a more permanent destination” (107).

Having lived all her life only according to her own rules, Sita was not prepared for a sudden betrayal by Devi who decided to run away with Gopal. Able now to see her life in its entirety, she realizes “that it is too late for sudden reversals,

or a fresh start outside the parameters, she had constructed, or allowed to be constructed, around her “(107). Sita had “seen in her life the inevitability of cause and effect the interplay between situations adoptions” (108) and she was shocked by Devi’s betrayal. Devi “had torn her respectability, her very name to shreds” (108) and now Sita “spent her rage, her acrid bitterness on the over-pruned plants” (108) the cook and the chauffeur and sent a cryptic message to Mahesh: “No scandal, please” (109). Yet, she knew that Devi would come back to her because disillusionment with her lover was bound to come in very soon. One is surprised to see the deft expertise with which this puppeteer Sita holds the strings even in remote control. True to her expectations, Devi does come back to “a wild and over grown garden” (139) and “the faint sounds of a veena” (139). Sita had lived her life with grim determination, made a choice and pays a price in order to be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law. She builds “a wall of reticence around herself” (136). This would seem true if we were to judge Sita by Devi’s yardstick. Her entire life was dedicated to only an ideal-“to being the ideal woman” (107) and she was willing to pay any price for it. Even at the end of the novel, we see her as resilient as ever and ready for merciless introspection. The freshly-dusted veena suggests the possibility of her own attempting to attain what she had denied herself all these years—to live her life for her self. Her daughter Devi belongs to a totally different category.

Fed on the stories of Gandhari and Damayanti, Uma and Amba, princes and princesses, Devi grows up certain that a world of splendors awaited her. Her stay and study abroad leave her with experiences and memories totally unsuited for her life in India. Leaving behind the freedom that the US offered her, Devi returned to India because, “Amma’s letters brought with them an unspoken message of loneliness, poignant in its quiet dignity....But the image of her alone by the sea teased me like a

magnet...that she might need me, my hesitant, self-doubting presence was intoxicating” (16). As an only child of her parents, Devi’s childhood was an easy one filled with all the pleasure and pain of a normal child with a doting but spineless father, there “motherly hand, firm and all knowing” (10). The annual summer visit to the grandmother’s house where the latter’s stories filled her house with “superhuman warriors, men and women destined to lead heroic lives of golden splendors” (27). A bagful of certificates and a scholarship to study abroad were also deft stokes of her mother, who planned and executed everything to perfection. Devi would grow and prosper in “the wholesome rays of a scientific antiseptic sun” (106) was the mother’s fond hope for the daughter. Devi’s experience in the US is just hinted at in the first chapter which deals with Devi’s last day there before her departure for India. We get a glimpse of Dan “who was Devi’s answer to the white claustrophobia of an all-clean all-American campus” (3). Devi’s return to India makes clear that she had always known—these experiences would “always belong to a blurred region of fantasy like the tantalizing images of some alien mirage, some barley remembered dream of clandestine passion” (3).

Devi’s mother is happy to have her wandering “only daughter back unscathed, her filial piety intact,” (12) plans her future very dexterously and determinedly. As a woman who always knew what she wanted and got it, Sita allows Devi just enough time to become “adept at wearing the nigh jewels and sari, the right smile,” (16) before she plays her next card and invites prospective grooms and their families to meet her. Devi ironically refers to the entire impeccable organization as a traditional Swayamvara, where the bride chose her groom from among the assembled prospective hopefuls. After meeting five or six probable suitors in about three to four months, Mahesh is chosen or “accepted” (22) by Devi. She had “the limpid-eye

blessings” (22) of her mother as she married Mahesh and moved to her new home on Jacaranda Road in Bangalore. The huge house which once witnessed the bustle of a big joint family now has as its occupants only Mahesh and Devi, Mahesh’s father Baba and the caretaker Mayamma. Devi’s marital life lacks the colour and excitement that she had expected. Mahesh is a matter of fact, unromantic, regional manager of a multinational company who expects nothing special or exciting from a marriage. Devi spends her time wandering about the house, talking to Baba, hearing Mayamma’s stories about the past, trying her hand at painting and being the perfect hostess and then on planning a baby which does not succeed. One can see the total boredom that assails her in such a life: “I spend hours every afternoon, opening dusty rooms and cockroach-ridden cupboards” (59). Her desire to take up a job or acquire another degree is met with such a discouraging tone and attitude that she is forced to put them aside. In fact, Mahesh seems totally insensitive to the possibility of Devi. She says; “I want to learn Sanskrit—to understand Baba’s quotations better,” he quips: “The English translations are good enough” (52). “I could look for some kind of a job,” (55) Devi suggests, to which he replies: “There is so much for you to do at home” (56). When she says, “I must look for a job,” (64) he snubs her: “And what will you do when the baby comes?” (65) Baba’s death while visiting his daughter in New York only compounds Devi’s loneliness. Mahesh seems to be totally insensible to all this and only snaps: “This is what comes of educating woman. Your grandmother was barely literate. Wasn’t she a happier woman than you are? What’s it you want? (74) Though Devi cannot provide him with an immediate, clear-cut answer, it sets her wondering:

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 dream instead. (74)

Into such a scenario appears the neighbor Gopal whose music strikes an immediate chord in Devi: “The music wafts in faintly from the house beyond the high wall. First, a slow teasing of notes, suggestions of melody. A notes is struck, pure, a liquid circle glimmering in its completeness, and held for so long that it permeates the helplessly responsive pores of my skin” (74). She develops a new journey with him. Though his musical heaven is not the one she wishes to be, Devi finds, “ a warm glow begins to stretch its caress across my body and the scales sway their way down a zigzag path, a curve here a detour there, and a pattern forms itself, flowing sensuously like the life-giving waters of some ancient river” (75). In fact, this turning of her life from Mahesh to Gopal gives her momentary happiness as if a ringing code of music.

Lacking family love, care and closeness of her husband, Devi finds herself spending sleepless nights, aching for a “blissful numbness” (78) till she finally decides, “I must learn to love,” (78) and walks out on Mahesh. This decision to live with Gopal is hers alone and she sneaks out like “a common little adulteress” (95). She hopes to “soar high on the crest of Gopal’s wave of ragas” (95) but very soon life with Gopal begins to seem like that of a kite “that had snapped free of its string” (129). She found herself in an embarrassed position in Gopal’s entourage, she noticed a leering glance from an accompanist, the “appraisal of a straying eye, cool and dismissive” (133) attempting to label her. None of this pleased Devi, none of it was flattering to her. She realized that she was alone “in her isolated corner, an outsider forever on the fringes of a less ambivalent identity” (135); that Gopal was as wedded

to his music and concerts, as Mahesh was to his job and that her presence or absence would make little difference to Gopal. She thought of him as a person “who should make love in a room filled with mirrors” (135). Her present situation also makes her realize that she had allowed others to pull her strings, that “I have made very few choices” (137). Devi realizes also that she should make a choice now probably a snap decision: “Devi knew the time was right; if she did not act now, she would forever be condemned to drift between worlds, a floating island detached from the solidity of the mainland” (138). Covering the mirror with the peacock-colored saree, Devi left behind the sleeping Gopal and boarded a train back to Madras “to stay and fight, to make sense of it all” (139). Though she left, like a fugitive, in the middle of the night, she was now “no longer on the run” (138). She was willing to begin at the beginning was giving her life like her mother’s “wild and overgrown” garden.

Mayamma is the archetypal female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as she was expected to. She bore the brunt of cruelty that society had ordained for a woman—as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a deserted woman and mother. She made no choice; she had no choice but to live a predetermined life: “She had had no choices really. She had coveted birth, endured life, nursed death” (136). Born about fifteen years later into higher social and economic strata, Sita chose the feminine role of a good daughter-in-law and wife. In order to achieve that to perfection, she trampled on her music and destroyed the artist in her. Having once chosen her role in life, she never, she never had any qualms or doubts about it. She performed her duties as wife and then mother to perform in these roles. Sita is projected as the strongest of the three as she knew what she wanted and worked for that. As in music, so in life one had to work hard to achieve that goal: “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” (102). Her pangs of deprivation or regretted her choice let her choose a way to escape from the present situation.

The growing character of Devi in the course of novel stands her as a modern feminist. From a small girl for her grandmother’s stories, she undergoes the life of a matured woman. Though she lacks the will to choose a better life, and her early decisions are faltering, we note a development in her character. Initially, she is easily influenced by societal role expectations; she quits the US and leaves behind Dan because of a sense of filial piety, marries Mahesh as a good daughter should, attempts to be full-time wife and house maker as an Indian *Pativrata* should. Gradually she shows her resolve in going out with Gopal. The world that she now wants to experience is like the train blessed garden “lush in spite of its sand choked roots,” (139) a life in all its multifaceted myriad colored possibilities. She has to experience the happiness that can come from one self “for whatever is dependent on others is misery” (68). This changing role gives her a position of modern woman who is always self conscious for her family and society.

The physical and mental suffering of female characters creates their lives to an eternal perdition. Meanwhile, they realize a way of living because these social and religious courses of praying or understanding make them different. To every woman, survival is of paramount importance. The three main women characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* manage to survive by walking a tightrope or playing a balancing act. Not succumbing to sorrow or despair, they do not commit suicide like Anita Desai’s protagonist. They prove the strength of their womanhood, “rehearsing in mind the words and actions” in their struggle for survival (139). The parameters of choice have altered tremendously and Devi seems a beacon light for the modern Indian woman.

IV: Conclusion: Penance as Central Aspect in Indian Women

The Thousand Faces of Night explores the intersections of gender, caste and the (re)telling of history in the narrative form. Githa Hariharan, the novelist, represents the reality for a considerable section of Indian womanhood inserted in a brahminical, high class environment. She believes they want a wider exposure, freedom from their husbands and family members, and move over a path of their own understanding. However, they can not have their dreamy world because their societies see a difference between male and female, as strong and weak, housewife and business runner. Through her different characters—Mayamama, Sita, Devi, Hariharan explains the process of seeking woman's status and freedom. The novelist brings her fictional people from house workers to manager of international company, from a priest to a university scholar. To explore the domain of women, she draws various women roles, for instance, a housemaid to princess like daughter of a cultured family. Nevertheless, the path of living of these fictional female characters gets entangled in a chain of myths to modern worship for their happiness and freedom. They worship various Hindu gods and goddesses, read holy books, recite mantras and consider their husbands as gods. Women of 1980s and 1990s, therefore, in Hariharan's novel, are compared to the women of mythology as to show ideal womanhood.

Devi retells or rewrites stories she observes or listens to. She belongs to the third generation but is bound with the second through her mother Sita and also with the first generation, to which her grandmother and Mayamma belong. They seem to find themselves within invisible or metaphorical walls which each try to tear apart in her own way to create spaces for herself. In other words, Hariharan displays the history of gender injustice in community by linking women's lives and struggles across generations and barriers of caste and class. In course of the novel, the stories

are retold in different ways from female perspectives. Devi's grandmother's way of handling old tales is the burden of the tradition that has changed. So, old stories change whenever they are narrated and passed on from one generation to another. The process of net-working among women of different ages and generations and castes in the novel is framed by numerous myths and real life stories. Devi rewrites these stories within her own life story, which is the basic frame of the entire plot. She observes and hears strategies of women's survival, but her strategies later are different since every woman has to learn for herself, and survival is the highest ideal in the struggle-ridden life of women. So, the women, Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, have each to find a way to come to terms with life.

Telling stories of three different generations, i.e. creating history, is in itself a way of producing new entities, new identities. Hariharan's stories call for a re-vision and transformation in the three main power structures—state/condition, religion, family. She subverts the present with past, real women to mythical women, modern family to traditional family. Patriarchal Indian society, generally, rules through mythical understanding and practices whereas the modern society forms new codes and conducts as the people need. Moreover, people in former society are guided by religious books, for instance, in Hindu society; they follow the Ramayana and Mahabharata to present an ideal world and role of male and female as Ram and Sita, two central characters there.

The novel shows a picture of penance performance in the lives of Mayamama, Sita and Devi, as women did in mythological stories for good status of their husbands, better living, moreover, for a hope of child. Devi has a profound impact of mythological stories on her mind that her grandmother used to narrate in her childhood. It was the story of Gandhari about her penance and sacrifice to represent

an ideal Hindu family, a bride's position and role of a daughter-in-law. Devi, an educated and westernized lady of modern India has order, reason and progress. Furthermore, she gives the impression of a woman who hates all illusions with self-confidence.

However, Devi is not strong enough to respond to the Indian society as a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She finds cracks in the real life, and gets nothing useful in the stories of mythical figures—Gauri, Gandhari, Uma, Amba and Parvati. She perceives these childhood stories just told to comfort children when their parents got problem in growing. After her return from America, she marries to Mahesh. His cold and indifferent attitude, and her infertility and lack of understanding in the family keep Devi's new life in sharp contrast with her unmarried life. Devi accepts penance as an inevitable part of a woman's life: "That which is hard to get over, hard to get, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance; it is difficult to overcome penance" (67). And the notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women victims. Like her mother, Sita, or Mayama, the old caretaker, she falls into the same world of women. She seeks a way out eloping with Mahesh, but it does not give her any relief in her life. Finally, she leaves him and makes her way to her mother's house. In this regard, it can be said that it is an act of penance of her protest against Mahesh and Gopal, and against her own self. She undergoes the conflicts, psychological aggression and violence to adjust and exist in modern Indian society.

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