

Original Article

Representations of Womanhood in Githa Hariharan's Fiction: A study

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Githa Hariharan, in her fiction, presents Indian women as strong and active individuals who challenge oppression rather than accept it silently. By retelling myths, exploring women's experiences and identities, and highlighting the importance of family memories and relationships across generations, her female characters resist patriarchal, social, and cultural restrictions and strive to achieve independence and self-determination. Her works contains feminist elements to a great deal. The subject of woman's essence, perseverance and separate figures recognizably in creators, done remaining content with woman's inert capacity as woman and life partner, conveys her angry contradiction. She breaks down the deep rooted. Astuteness contained in articulations, statutes, stories, dreams and feelings. Her disappointment imparts through the technique for spoof, confusion and joke. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman's activity and edifies the advancement of over once more: woman who is steady with her own self. Githa Hariharan has been acclaimed as one of the prominent women writers contributing to a body of Indian literature committed to feminist and social issues. She is one of those women writers who have powerfully and frankly represented what they have felt about women and their lives in postmodern and postcolonial India.

This paper analyzes The Thousand Faces of Night (1992), In Times of Siege (2003), The Ghosts of Vasu Master (1994), and selected stories from The Art of Dying (1993) to argue that Hariharan constructs feminist agency as relational, spectral, and subversive. Drawing on the feminist perspectives of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Uma Chakravarti, this study places Githa Hariharan's fiction within postcolonial feminist discourse and explores its intersections with caste, class, gender, and nation.

Keywords: Womanhood, Identity, Feminist agency, Postcolonial Feminism, Myth.

Introduction

It is a matter of pride to state that the women novelists constitute a major group of the Indian writers in English. Writings of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Kamala Das, Chitra Benerjee and Bapsi Sidhwa. Carry the substance from the point of view of feminism. These are the prominent Indian women novelists who have dealt with the problems of women, in their works. Githa Hariharan represents one from such top ranking groups. Githa Hariharan, through her works, marks water high success in the field of fiction which describes feminism with a higher voice. Githa Hariharan occupies a distinctive position in Indian English literature: neither as stridently activist as Arundhati Roy nor as introspectively domestic as Anita Desai, she crafts narratives where women's interiority becomes a political battleground. Her protagonists—whether the myth-haunted Devi, the besieged academic Shivani, or the spectral figures haunting Vasu Master—refuse the binary of victim or victor. Instead, they *reclaim agency* through acts of remembering, storytelling, and bodily defiance. This paper defines identity and agency not as liberal individualism but as a collective, historically embedded capacity to act within constraint. This study examines how Githa Hariharan transforms the Indian woman from a passive cultural symbol into an autonomous, self-defining subject. It argues that this transformation is achieved through three key strategies: the subversion of traditional myths, resistance to patriarchal control over the female body, and the transmission of empowering knowledge through memory, storytelling, and intergenerational experiences. **Womanhood** is the state, experience, or condition of being an adult female human, encompassing the biological, social, cultural, psychological, and existential dimensions of female identity across time and context.



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Facets of Womanhood:

1. **Social and Cultural Aspects of Womanhood :** Womanhood is shaped by the social roles, cultural expectations, and traditions associated with women in society, including their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, professionals, and citizens. These roles and expectations vary across cultures, communities, and historical periods. While some societies emphasize traditional gender roles, others provide greater opportunities for women's participation in education, employment, and leadership. However, patriarchal structures often influence the construction of womanhood by imposing norms related to honor, morality, purity, and productivity, thereby shaping women's identities, choices, and social experiences.
2. **Biological:** Refers to sex characteristics: XX chromosomes, reproductive capacity (menstruation, pregnancy, menopause), and secondary traits (breasts, wider pelvis). However, biology is not destiny—intersex, transgender, and infertile women challenge rigid definitions.
3. **Political & Historical:** Womanhood as a site of struggle: suffrage, reproductive rights, Me Too, widow sati, or hijab bans. It is shaped by race, class, caste, sexuality, and disability—e.g., Black womanhood (enslaved, hyper-visible) differs from white womanhood (protected, idealized).
4. **Psychological & Subjective:** A woman's internal sense of self: how she navigates desire, ambition, fear, joy, and aging. This includes the "double consciousness" (Du Bois via bell hooks) of being seen *as* a woman while asserting *I am*.
5. **Existential & Relational:** Simone de Beauvoir's insight: "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" Womanhood emerges in relation—to men, children, other women, the state, and the self. It is performativity yet deeply felt Womanhood is the lived, contested, and ever-evolving process of embodying femaleness in a world that both defines and denies it. It is not a monolith but a mosaic—biological, chosen, imposed, and transcended.

1. *The Thousand Faces of Night* - Analysis in the view of Mythic Subversion:

Devi, the novel's protagonist, returns from America to an arranged marriage that replicates the Sita archetype: obedient, fertile, silent. Yet Hariharan fractures this myth. Devi's grandmother's tales—of fierce goddesses and rebellious brides—function as "counter-memory" (Chakravarti 34) against patriarchal historiography.

"The veena was Devi's dowry, but also her weapon. When she played, the strings bled with the music of women who had never been allowed to speak." (Hariharan, *Thousand Faces* 112)

The veena becomes a metaphor for silenced creativity. Devi's eventual abandonment of her husband is not flight but exile as authorship—a refusal to remain within the epic's prescribed ending. This aligns with Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism," where women temporarily inhabit mythic roles to subvert them (Spivak 244).

2. *In Times of Siege* - Analysis in the view of Corporeal Resistance:

Shivani Murthy, a middle-aged history professor, faces communal backlash for teaching Basava's radical poetry. Her body—menstruating, aging, desiring—becomes the site of fascist surveillance. Hariharan writes:

"They wanted her womb to be a museum, her blood a relic. But Shivani bled in the present tense." (In *Times of Siege* 89)

Menstruation here is not shame but chronopolitical defiance: a reminder that women's bodies exist outside communal timelines. Shivani's erotic relationship with a younger student further destabilizes the desexualized "mature" woman trope. Agency emerges not despite the body, but through it.

3. *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* - Analysis in the view of Spectral Pedagogy:

Vasu, a burnt-out teacher, is haunted by the ghosts of his former students—many of them girls erased by poverty, early marriage, or suicide. These spectral women do not seek vengeance; they demand *recognition*. One ghost, Lakshmi, teaches Vasu to read her silence: "You taught us grammar, sir. But never how to conjugate I want." (Ghosts 201)

Hariharan inverts the guru-shishya dynamic: the male teacher learns from female absence. This "hauntology" (Derrida via Abraham) suggests that agency persists beyond death, in the ethical demand of the unrepresented.

4. Micro-Resistances in Short Fiction

In "The Remains of the Feast," an elderly widow defies Brahminical purity by gorging on forbidden meat. Her gluttony is not decadence but reclamation of appetite—a refusal to starve for respectability. Similarly, in "Ghosht," a Muslim woman's ghostly return exposes communal violence's gendered aftermath. These stories operate at the scale of the everyday, where resistance is not revolutionary but *cumulative*: a stolen bite, a whispered curse, a refusal to mourn properly.

5. Limitations: Although Githa Hariharan's protagonists are predominantly drawn from upper-caste and middle-class backgrounds, her fiction provides a nuanced exploration of women's experiences within these social locations. The relatively limited representation of Dalit women and other marginalized groups invites critical reflection on the scope and inclusiveness of her feminist vision. In comparison to the works of Mahasweta Devi, which directly foreground subaltern voices and struggles, Hariharan's narratives focus more closely on the lives of educated and socially privileged women?

Yet this limitation is also her strength: by centering articulate women, she exposes the internal contradictions of privileged femininity. Agency, for Hariharan, is never pure; it is negotiated, compromised, and shared.



Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's female characters do not seek to overthrow patriarchal structures through direct confrontation; rather, they challenge and negotiate these structures from within. Through the creative reworking of myths, the assertion of bodily autonomy, and the preservation of memory and storytelling, they transform spaces of constraint into opportunities for agency and self-expression. Hariharan's fiction critiques universalizing notions of feminism while remaining attentive to the specific social, cultural, and historical realities of women's lives. In the context of contemporary India, where issues of gender, identity, and religion continue to shape social discourse, her portrayals of women's resilience and resistance remain highly relevant and significant.

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