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Reclaiming Identity: Vernacular Feminism in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Gita Hariharan's novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, has significant importance within the Indian literature as it extensively explores the intricate nature of identity and the multifarious challenges faced by women in a patriarchal Indian social structure. This study examines the intricate depiction of vernacular feminism in the novel, elucidating the many methods through which female characters defy conventional gender roles and standards. The novel's plot takes place within the vibrant metropolitan setting of post-independence India, effectively depicting the fundamental aspects of cultural variety and the conflict between traditional values and contemporary ideals. Hariharan provides insight into the subtle but impactful forms of resistance that take place inside household environments, as shown via the experiences of the female characters. These women, hailing from diverse socio-cultural origins, adeptly negotiate the intricacies of their life while claiming their agency and distinctiveness. This study investigates the use of vernacular feminism by Gita Hariharan as a narrative device to portray female characters that actively oppose subjugation, challenge societal inequities, and reinvent their sense of self in the midst of challenging circumstances. This study examines the narratives of the characters in the book, with a focus on their processes of self-exploration and attainment of agency. The analysis also takes into account the influence of the vernacular feminism shown in the novel on the wider conversation around feminism in India, as well as its consequences for the overarching endeavor to achieve gender equality.

Key Words: Vernacular Feminism, Identity, Feminist Discourse, Gender Identity, Self-discovery

Introduction:

Feminism is an ideological framework centered on the pursuit of women's liberation, premised on the idea that women experience various forms of injustice as a result of their gender. Law journals that use the term "Feminism" have yet to make an explicit effort to provide a comprehensive definition of the underlying issue they want to address. We spoke with the editors of the Yale Journal of Law & Feminism (YJLF) in order to get clarification on whether they had a defined statement of their concept, if any, since we assumed they would have one. A response was not received. However, it is intriguing to note that a legal journal focused on the topic of "Feminism" may lack a presently established definition.



First-wave feminism primarily critiques the institution of the family, which plays a defining role in shaping a woman's identity within a bourgeois society. The concept of family is a social construct that is formed via biological ties, legal unions such as marriage, or the process of adoption. The concept might be characterized as nuclear, including parents and offspring, or expanded to include more relatives. The inclusion of women is of significant importance inside this unit. The active engagement of women is essential for the advancement of society, nation, and family. Despite assuming the role of the dominant person within her family, she endures a life characterized by servitude, hardship, and subjugation. The primary responsibility assigned to woman is the nurturing of her children and the management of household affairs, which is considered her predetermined destiny. During her formative years, she is subject to the authority of her father, and as she enters adulthood, she becomes reliant on her husband. However, in the event of her husband's death, she becomes dependent on her sons. It is said that it is inappropriate for a woman to get satisfaction from exercising her own will. During her formative years, she was raised in an environment characterized by nurturing and caring, devoid of any significant obligations or duties. However, subsequent to her marriage, her circumstances undergo a spontaneous transformation. Throughout history, there has been a greater expectation on women to comply to social norms compared to men. The situation of women has often shown a contradictory nature. She has assumed a central role inside the familial unit, although she continues to occupy a subordinate position as well. She is not given the ability to engage in independent thinking. The individual in question is influenced by societal customs and freely assumes her obligations. The acceptance of independence by women is not granted by men.

Concept of Vernacular Feminism:

Vernacular feminism, sometimes referred to as localized feminism or grassroots feminism, places emphasis on the importance of gender conflicts and manifestations of women's empowerment that are peculiar to certain contexts. The acknowledgement is made that feminism cannot be uniformly delineated and implemented, given that the obstacles encountered by women are shaped by cultural, historical, and social circumstances that are specific to their respective geographical areas. Vernacular feminism emphasizes the significance of narratives originating from specific local contexts, grassroots mobilizations, and indigenous viewpoints that may diverge from Western or dominant feminist views.



Within the framework of vernacular feminism, women use their cultural and socio-economic contexts to effectively explain their lived experiences and assert their specific demands. These individuals actively question, and contest established societal norms and expectations within their own groups, therefore making valuable contributions to the wider feminist debate. Vernacular feminism illuminates the enduring nature, ingenuity, and multiplicity of women's endeavors for self-governance and parity.

Indian Feminism:

Indian feminism may be seen as a distinct branch of vernacular feminism that specifically focuses on the distinctive socio-cultural, historical, and political context of India. The feminist movement in India is characterized by its multidimensional nature, which is indicative of the country's diverse population and intricate historical background. The phenomenon has undergone a series of transformations, with each stage being influenced by distinct socio-political circumstances.

- **First-Wave Feminism:** During this era, there was a notable presence of Indian feminists who actively campaigned for women's rights and access to education. Significant individuals such as Pandita Ramabai and Anandibai Joshi played significant roles throughout this period.
- **Second-Wave Feminism:** The period after India's independence saw the incorporation of women's rights inside the framework of the Indian Constitution. Prominent figures such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Indira Gandhi made significant contributions to the realm of legal reforms and political representation.
- **Third-Wave Feminism:** Contemporary Indian feminism encompasses a range of concerns, including but not limited to the prevalence of violence against women, discriminatory practices within the workplace, and the advocacy for reproductive rights. The contemporary landscape has been significantly influenced by the endeavors of prominent campaigners like Arundhati Roy, as well as the concerted efforts of groups like the Gulabi Gang.

Indian feminism critically examines and addresses the intricate interplay of customs, caste structures, religious diversity, and economic inequality within the nation. The phenomenon is further characterized by the presence of intersectionality, acknowledging that gender-based discrimination is intertwined with several other criteria such as socioeconomic status, social hierarchy, and religious affiliation. The convergence of vernacular feminism and Indian feminism is evident in their shared focus on activity that is tailored to the



unique socio-cultural and historical contexts. Indian feminism is informed by the diverse feminist experiences of women across the country, acknowledging the significance of grassroots movements and regional manifestations of gender-related challenges. Indian feminists recognize and appreciate the various narratives and perspectives that together contribute to the broader discourse on women's rights and gender equality.

Vernacular feminism and Indian feminism play crucial roles within the broader context of the global feminist movement. The significance of understanding and valuing the specific settings in which women exercise their autonomy and confront repressive norms is emphasized. By acknowledging and understanding these contextual variations and coming together with the same objective of achieving gender equality, feminism evolves into a more encompassing, heterogeneous, and efficacious catalyst for societal change.

Vernacular Feminism in *The Thousand Faces of Night*:

Githa Hariharan, a prominent Indian female author, has endeavored to shed light on the deeply entrenched prejudices prevalent in Indian culture against the feminine gender. The literary work entitled *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) explores themes related to feminism, as well as those pertaining to gender and identity. The primary focus of the narrative is an examination of the lives of the characters Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, who navigate a culture characterized by male dominance. The female gender encounters many challenges during her lifetime and demonstrates resilience by relying on her own fortitude to overcome them. Githa's exploration of women characters offers insights on the Indian heritage, culture, and the societal role of women in India.

According to Githa, the concept of otherness is an inherent and fundamental aspect of human experience. The denial of freedom to an individual is sometimes referred to as oppression. Women are often marginalized and seen as "the other" due to societal constructs that characterize males as superior. In a culture characterized by contradiction, the upbringing of a female kid is subject to stringent parental supervision. There exists a perspective that posits the notion of assigning her a new authority figure, namely her spouse, who will assume control over her existence. The conventional feminine characteristics and graces are cultivated inside her in order to enhance her desirability as a potential candidate within the marriage market. From a young age, she has been groomed to be commodified. She receives less support in fostering her own unique identity. The determination of her job and marital choices is made by her father,



brother, and mother. In a conventional societal context, the autonomy of a young girl is restricted upon reaching the stage of puberty. However, it is worth noting that her brothers do not have any age-related limitations during this period. At this juncture, the presence of double standards becomes more pronounced and apparent. The girl's activities are restricted while guys are encouraged to engage in outdoor pursuits.

Githa Hariharan demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of these realities in her work *The Thousand Faces of Night*, wherein she closely examines gender-based discriminations inside the family and their profound effects on women. Githa Hariharan was born in Coimbatore in the year 1954. The individual in question is a novelist and editor of Indian origin, now residing in New Delhi. The first literary work authored by her is titled "The Thousand Faces of Night." The novel was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1993. The work has a notable quality in its use of lyrical language style, effectively depicting the challenging trajectory of three women as they navigate the complexities of Indian societal conventions. The individual earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Mumbai and a Master of Arts degree in Communications from Fairfield University. The individual received her education at the University of Bombay and thereafter pursued further studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

Sita, the maternal figure of Devi, serves as a captivating character inside the narrative, garnering the interest of readers. The individual in question has shown a commitment to self-effacement by rejecting her own femininity. Simultaneously, she endeavors to embody the characteristics of an exemplary wife and daughter-in-law. The notion of women being subordinate to males and seen as possessions of men is deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of India. Sita had a deep affection for playing the veena, which held a significant place in her life. However, when faced with a multitude of choices, a woman ultimately decides to enter into matrimony. The individual relinquished her romantic relationship and allocated her time to domestic activities, mostly centered on the kitchen or her designated workspace.

Sita's choice to relinquish the veena might be seen as an act of self-denial, motivated by her commitment to prioritize the well-being of her family. She fully capitalized on this opportunity and transformed herself into a proficient domestic apparatus, dedicated to furthering her husband's career, resulting in his attainment of success as a business executive. Annapurna tries to assume her cousin's position. However, she remained in close proximity, observing attentively.



At first, the sign of temptation, the initiation of an accomplice, she deftly swept into her palm the fragile budding sweetness. She crushed it, ruthlessly, and she secured her place. Her love for garden, veena-playing and Devi are her main objects in life, objects in her life that can produce results that she wanted. She hated Mahadevan's passion of folklore. When he dies, she burnt the is papers before they burnt the body, quickly efficiently in a modern satirized crematorium. (*The Thousand Faces* 106)

Every choice she made demonstrates strength. It is often observed that mothers tend to enforce similar limitations on their daughters as those that were placed upon them by their own mothers, representing the preceding generation. They endeavored to achieve their aspirations by means of their daughters. Sita aspired for Devi to embody the qualities of an exemplary lady and hence facilitated her journey to the United States to pursue further education. Upon Devi's birth, she discovered a new veena instrument to engage with, and she exhibited a strong reluctance to relinquish it.

In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up with a view that she is to be given to a new master. Simone de Beauvoir observes that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. Sita belonged to traditional thinking. She recalled Devi from America and she had again been packed and dispatched, and this time to a permanent destination that is wifehood. (*The Thousand Faces* 107)

Marriage is considered to be one of the most profound and complex human relationships. Marriage is traditionally seen as a sacred bond between two individuals, including both their spiritual and physical selves. In the context of the Hindu faith, it is customary to refer to the wife as Ardhagini or Sahadharmini, terms that signify the principle of equality. The person in question perceives the situation as a trap that undermines her rights, individuality, and autonomy, emphasizing the fundamental importance of her independence from others, akin to the essence of awareness.

Marriage is an endeavor mostly experienced by women. The conclusion of her quest is marked by her assimilation into the family unit, resulting in the loss of her own identity. In her perspective, the significance of family surpasses that of the individual. The protagonist exhibits self-sacrifice. She is instructed to refrain from emulating masculine attributes that may lead to moral corruption and spiritual malevolence. In a patriarchal culture, males are unable to embrace women's independence. In the realm of



gender studies, it is often acknowledged that women are often positioned as the "other" in relation to men. The current literary work portrays the tragic experiences of women who, inside their inner consciousness, articulate their desire to break free from the constraints of male dominance. Devi, who had a high level of education, was a member of the third generation. She was connected to the second generation via her mother, and furthermore had a connection to the first generation through the oral narratives passed down by her grandmother. The female migrant demonstrates a capacity for adaptation, allowing her to retain some aspects of her own cultural heritage while also assimilating those of the host nation. Devi exemplifies a certain character archetype. Devi exemplifies the archetype of a liberated and westernized woman who, upon returning to her own country of India, is expected to assume a role conventionally designated for her.

The protagonist's experiences in America and her interactions with Dan may be seen as a metaphorical representation of her aspirations and struggles as an Indian individual. Consequently, due to her cultural background and associated societal expectations, she finds herself unable to accept Dan's proposal of marriage. From her perspective, her pleasure was inherently contingent upon her incapacity to envision a future existence beside him. Following her encounter with the perplexing liberties and challenges of student life in the United States, she relocated to India with the intention of living beside her mother, Sita. The act of reimagining myths serves as a kind of liberation, whereby established customs are redefined and human-created regulations are undermined.

In the current literary work, the protagonist Devi assumes the role of an audience to the oral tradition of tales as recounted by her grandmother throughout her formative years. These narratives possess exceptional qualities that distinguish them from typical tales. The individual in question deliberately selected each tale in response to my many juvenile inquiries, tailoring each narrative to suit a certain situation. However, the veracity of the incidents recounted by her is called into question when Devi herself encountered a similar circumstance. The narrative surrounding Nala-Damayanti's swayamvara is contradicted by the fact that she compelled her own swayamvara. Upon her arrival in India, she had several challenges in her daily endeavors. However, she soon discerned that she was ingrained inside a family that adhered to traditional ideologies.



The tales narrated by her grandmother were representative of the first wave of traditional thought. The narratives presented by the individual in question were representative of conventional themes and served to cultivate the child's cognitive framework regarding established norms, regulations, and cultural customs. Analogous to the confectionery creations she crafted, such as intricately detailed elephants and swans, her stories functioned as molds that underwent a transformative process when subjected to the metaphorical fire of storytelling. Despite her extensive education in the United States, she chooses to embrace the cultural tradition of an Indian woman by agreeing to an arranged marriage. Mahesh, in the context of her perception, did not possess the qualities or status typically associated with a prince, but rather held the position of a regional manager within a multinational corporation specializing in the production of detergents and toothpastes. However, it did not take long for her to realize that she was in a state of confinement. She endeavored to conform to the expectations associated with the roles of a spouse and a dutiful daughter-in-law. The author highlights that marriage should not be seen just as a union between a man and a woman, but rather as a system that subordinates women, with the purpose of perpetuating slavery and treating women as private possessions. Mahesh expressed his disapproval towards Devi's desires, such as engaging in card games, pursuing Sanskrit studies, or seeking employment. The evident disregard for Devi's uniqueness shown by the person in question indicates their adherence to patriarchal ideologies.

Devi posits that her grandmother's tales serve as an introductory exploration of femininity, whereas Baba's narratives establish the boundaries and constraints associated with it. The father-in-law embodies the beneficent and patriarchal elements within his narratives. He was a member of the patriarchal society. The book explores the impact of patriarchy on women belonging to various socioeconomic strata and age groups, with a special focus on their experiences as marginalized individuals. Following a series of five or six proposals, she ultimately made the decision to enter into matrimony with Mahesh. However, in his role as a manager, he held the belief that it was necessary to oversee and control all aspects of life. From his perspective, marriage is seen as an essential aspect of human existence. He acknowledges his desire for a female partner who fulfills the roles of both a spouse and a parent. I apologize, but it seems that you have not provided any text for me to rewrite.

In the context of Indian society, the post-marital phase significantly alters the lives of women. She does not possess independent perspectives. Women are also constrained by a multitude of social and religious norms and traditions that confine them inside the confines of societal boundaries. According to



Balzac, before to marriage, a woman's identity is shaped by her parents, whereas after marriage, her role as a wife is influenced by her spouse. When Devi stated her desire to acquire knowledge in Sanskrit, Mahesh responded by questioning the practical use of such erudition. In her frustration with her arrogant spouse, Mahesh, the protagonist recognizes the need of adhering to societal expectations as an Indian woman, which entails feigning qualities of a dutiful wife, including displaying affection for hosting social gatherings and concealing any signs of illness or discontentment. The protagonist acquires essential responsibilities from her long-standing family retainer, Mayamma. In Indian culture, there exists an expectation for women to outwardly demonstrate adherence to longstanding cultural practices. In Indian culture, the life of a female undergoes significant transformation upon marriage, whereas the same cannot be said for her husband. The absence of children might result in a loss of agency for women. In this instance, Devi's physical appearance is described as being characterized by a slender physique, specifically emphasizing her skeletal structure and a noticeably flat abdomen. This description is provided in the context of Mahesh inquiring about the possibility of Devi being pregnant. In the context of a patriarchal Indian culture, there exists a prevailing perception that men are inherently positive and always correct, whereas women are seen to be incorrect and associated with negativity. Mahesh expressed a need for information on Devi's pregnancy, whilst Devi seemed to lack a strong inclination towards embracing parenthood. The individual consistently replied with the phrase "no news." She maintains a physique characterized by a slender frame and a prominently flat abdominal region. I apologize, but it seems that your text is incomplete. Could you please provide more information It is evident that he is in good health, whereas she is the one who would benefit from seeking consultation with a gynecologist. The state of not having children might render a woman completely devoid of power. However, it may also serve as a means to manipulate the distribution of power. The process of self-realization is facilitated by Devi. The individual encountered a profound sense of void and purposelessness within the context of her marital lifestyle. He conducted a comparative analysis between her and other ladies who had a lower level of education.

According to the Manu-shastra, women are instructed to fulfill the role of serving their husbands. On occasion, Devi saw herself as embodying the qualities and characteristics associated with the Hindu goddesses Sati, Durga, and Kali. The individual in question drew inspiration from Baba's narrative titled 'Kriya', which revolves on a formidable female character who haunts and wreaks havoc upon households where women are subjected to derogatory treatment. The individual experiences intense rage, exhibiting a



fiery disposition. She has a fiery presence akin to the Hindu goddess Kali, vociferously expressing her insatiable need. Every era is characterized by its own unique manifestations of Kritya. According to my reading, during the era of Kali, it is documented that every home harbors a Kritya. I apologize, but I cannot provide a response without any user text. Please provide the text The reason Baba did not share this experience with her might be attributed to his affiliation with a patriarchal culture. Devi finds it highly appealing. Devi chooses not to pursue motherhood and abstains from entering into marriage.

Certain women choose to cohabit with males outside of the institution of marriage as a means to get a sense of completeness and to engage in a fully committed relationship. Devi also endeavored to live a life of emancipation. However, Devi quickly comes to the realization that his emotional attachment towards her lacks authenticity. The perception of women may be dichotomous, with individuals either seeing them as a means of achieving spiritual or emotional elevation, or attributing their own feelings of culpability onto them. Within the framework of a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is mostly constructed based on her relationship to a male figure, wherein she is primarily recognized as either a wife or a mother to his kid. Devi's mother, grandmother, Mayamma, and to a certain degree Devi herself, had a sense of entitlement that allowed them to exert dominance within their individual family units. Nevertheless, their deficiency lay in their limited self-awareness and their adherence to the conventional patriarchal framework, which influenced their conceptualizations. Devi expressed a desire to preserve her own identity, which had already suffered in the context of her marriage. Consequently, she and her partner chose to defy the societal norms associated with marriage and separate from their spouse in order to pursue individual growth and satisfaction. Upon seeing the inner need for self-discovery, she proceeded to her maternal abode.

The narrative elucidates this notion by using the characters of Devi and Mayamma, an elderly domestic worker in the household of Mahesh. The character Mayamma serves as a representation of impoverished individuals who endure exploitation from their spouses, children-in-law, and other individuals who deceive them, ultimately leading to their abandonment and isolation. Mayamma saw marriage as a system of tyranny in several manifestations, rather than as a means of protection as it was originally intended. However, she embraced her suffering with a sense of familiarity, like to that of an old acquaintance. In actuality, societal norms and restrictions often restrict the ability of a significant portion of women to freely express their individuality. The concept of female liberation is not to be encouraged. The



identity of a woman was defined by her role as a mother to her son. Consequently, she engaged in a period of penance lasting a decade.

Devi emancipates herself from the societal expectations associated with conforming to traditional feminine roles, in order to achieve a state of liberated and autonomous creative expression. The concept being discussed is the self, which represents a state of being that transcends traditional gender distinctions, sometimes referred to as the androgynous principle. This principle embodies a state of being that is not confined to either male or female characteristics, and is characterized by a pursuit of self-actualization. Within the context of the literary work, the institution of marriage undergoes a transformation, evolving into a confining mechanism that perpetuates the subjugation and suffering of women. Historically, husbands exerted dominion over their wives by a strict and discourteous system of regulations, whilst benefiting from a greater degree of personal liberty. Women are subjected to exploitation and objectification, treated as mere belongings, with the intention of suppressing their individuality and subjugating them. The characters Devi, Sita, and Mayamma were portrayed as objects inside the narrative.

Conclusion:

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi, Sita, and Mayamma exhibited a strong sense of familial responsibility by treating their respective families as their own. Women have a significant role within the family structure and in the lives of men. If one were to consider the analogy of man being likened to a flower, it might be posited that woman embodies the essence of smell. If one were to use the analogy of man as a ship, it may be said that the radar symbolizes woman. She exhibits sweetness and bitterness, as well as kindness. Nevertheless, these intellectually astute and emotionally perceptive women encounter significant resistance from the close-minded and traditionalist Indian culture, which regards tolerance, patience, and forbearance as necessary attributes for women. The portrayal of Indian women who silently endure agony while upholding Indian culture is a recurring theme in Indian literature. In Hariharan's work, the female protagonist is shown as successfully challenging the burdensome weight of tradition, symbolized by the metaphorical "thousand faces of night." Upon her return to her mother's residence, Devi enters the garden that has flourished untamed and abundant, no longer subject to Sita's meticulous care. As she strolls through this transformed space, the resonant melody of the veena, previously stifled by Sita's insistence on adhering to societal expectations of a dutiful wife, reaches her ears. The conclusion of the story culminates in a



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reaffirmation of the bond between a mother and her daughter. Upon contemplation of the experiences over their respective lifetimes, Devi perceives that both Mayamma, Sita, and Devi herself have engaged in a considerable amount of precarious balancing acts. Indian women are influenced by cultural traditions and societal norms, leading them to gladly embrace the role of safeguarding the dignity and status of their families. In societies characterized by male dominance, there is a tendency for the male spouse to exert control and disregard the female partner.



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