



A Feminist Interpretation of Female Characters in the Select Works of Githa Hariharan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Indian author Githa Hariharan illustrates the challenges faced by women in her novels. Numerous women in India continue to experience violence, particularly sexual assault, and frequently go unheard or disbelieved. The judicial system is sluggish, and society often tends to blame victims rather than providing support. This situation leads to feelings of powerlessness and silence among women. Githa Hariharan crafts narratives where women endure suffering, oppression, and silence, yet they also resist and strive to reclaim their voices. Her female protagonists symbolize the genuine struggles of Indian women who endure hardship but still challenge their circumstances. This paper links the real-world epidemic of sexual violence in India to the representation of women's experiences in Hariharan's works. Utilizing a feminist viewpoint, it aims to illustrate how her narratives empower women who are often marginalized. The research highlights that literature can illuminate societal truths and support the pursuit of justice and equality.

Keyword: Githa Hariharan, Feminist literature, Female voice, Rape crisis in India, Silenced body, Gender-based violence, Resistance and identity

Introduction

Women across various regions, particularly in India, persist in confronting violence, discrimination, and silencing. The female body frequently becomes a battleground for control, shame, and punishment. In recent years, the alarming increase in rape incidents in India has highlighted the ongoing dangers and unacknowledged status of women. Despite existing laws and activism, justice remains elusive, and many survivors experience blame or neglect. This contributes to a culture where women's suffering goes unspoken, and their narratives fade into obscurity.

In such a situation, feminist writers have a very important role. They use literature to break the silence, ask difficult questions, and show the truth of women's experiences. Githa Hariharan is one such writer who does not shy away from showing the reality of Indian women. She understands that silence is not natural, it is forced. Her novels give voice to women who have been ignored or forgotten. These women may come from different classes, castes, or religions, but they share one thing: the struggle to live with dignity in a society that often treats them as less than human.

Feminist authors play a crucial role in challenging this silence. They depict the struggles, resilience, and fight for autonomy of women. Githa Hariharan is an exemplary figure, an Indian

novelist who utilizes fictional storytelling to examine the lives of women constrained by societal norms while actively seeking their voices. Her novels discuss the control over women's bodies, their identities, and their resistance. She sheds light on the quiet suffering of women in both public and private spheres while showcasing their dreams, battles, and survival.

This paper draws a connection between the sexual violence crisis in India and the themes present in Hariharan's novels. It illustrates how her female characters reflect the voices of real women who encounter violence but often remain unheard. By analyzing her works such as *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *When Dreams Travel*, and *I Have Become the Tide*, this paper will investigate how literature can amplify the voices of those silenced and confront the systems perpetuating harm against women. Feminism in India has a distinct history. Unlike the Western feminist movement, which began with the push for voting rights, Indian feminism emerged while addressing various social issues, including poverty, caste dynamics, religious constraints, and lack of education.

Indian women have long faced societal expectations to uphold tradition, manage family obligations, and remain silent regarding their pain. These pressures have made it challenging for many women to speak out, especially about violence and abuse. Consequently, Indian feminism has had to contend not only with patriarchal structures but also with cultural practices and social impediments.

One of the most tragic and critical issues that Indian feminism grapples with is the crisis of rape. Daily news highlights instances of rape, molestation, and abuse, often perpetrated by powerful men against women from vulnerable or marginalized communities. Some incidents attract public outrage and stir protests, such as the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, while many others remain unnoticed. Victims frequently endure blame, shame, or coercion to maintain silence. This pervasive culture of silence surrounding sexual violence hinders the pursuit of justice and reveals persistent societal views that treat the female body as an entity to be managed, judged, or punished.

Githa Hariharan's work transcends mere storytelling. She reinterprets ancient myths, questions conventional roles, and amplifies women's voices. Her characters are not flawless or traditionally heroic; they embody a mix of realism, confusion, anger, and courage in their unique ways. Whether portraying the obedient daughter in *The Thousand Faces of Night* or the female narrator in *When Dreams Travel*, her characters illustrate the various forms of women's resistance, even when that resistance is subtle or concealed. Through this approach, Hariharan challenges not only patriarchy but also the literary traditions that have long overlooked women's viewpoints.

In contemporary India, where incidents of rape and violence are on the rise, literature like Hariharan's holds greater significance than ever. It serves as a reminder that women's narratives are not solely about individual suffering; they address broader systems of power and control. By illustrating how women endure, resist, or even crumble, these stories deepen our understanding of authentic justice, freedom, and dignity. They also highlight that empowering the silenced body goes beyond literary expression; it is a crucial political and social imperative.

The concept of the "silenced body" features prominently in feminist literature, and specifically in Githa Hariharan's novels. In feminist texts, the body represents more than just a physical entity. It becomes a battleground where pain, power, control, and liberty intersect. For centu-

ries, literature has often depicted women as frail, gentle, emotional, or submissive. Their bodies have been represented only in terms of beauty, motherhood, or sexual allure. However, feminist authors contest this portrayal. They inquire: What about the pain that women bear? What about the moments when they are silenced? What occurs when their bodies experience violation, abuse, or invisibility? These are the inquiries feminist literature aims to explore, particularly through narratives where the body serves as both a site of anguish and a symbol of resilience.

The notion of the "silenced body" is pivotal to your research title. A silenced body signifies not merely a body that lacks a voice; it comprises a body that is denied the opportunity to speak. This imposed silence often stems from family, religion, culture, and patriarchy. From an early age, many girls are conditioned to be quiet, refrain from speaking too loudly, never question authority, and always safeguard their reputation. Their bodies are governed by societal expectations, regulations, and fear. When they endure unfortunate incidents, such as sexual violence, they frequently face admonitions to remain silent to avoid disgrace. This imposed silence becomes a profound burden for many women throughout their lives.

Nevertheless, feminist authors strive to dismantle this silence. They articulate the pain that society endeavors to conceal. They empower female characters to voice their anger, trauma, and desires. They craft tales in which the body is not merely an object of observation but one that remembers, suffers, resists, and heals. Through their narratives, they reclaim the female body, not as something shameful or impure, but as a domain that rightfully belongs to the woman herself. This act of reclamation is significant because it transforms silence into expression and suffering into defiance.

Githa Hariharan's novels accomplish this remarkably. Her characters are women who have been muted in various ways. Some find themselves confined within traditional family structures, while others are plagued by trauma or grief. Nevertheless, each of them carries their body like a hidden journal a repository of all their experiences. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the protagonist is meant to embody the ideal daughter-in-law, quietly existing in a space where her desires are irrelevant. She remains silent not due to weakness, but because she has been conditioned over the years to stifle her voice. Yet, through her internal monologue and contemplations, the truth resonates. In *When Dreams Travel*, the reimagined Scheherazade tells tales to survive. She engages in storytelling not merely as an art form but as a means of survival in a world that seeks to silence her.

These women may not triumph in the conventional way. They might not dismantle systems or escape. However, by articulating, recalling, or simply living according to their own standards, they challenge the status quo. They illustrate that even silent beings are rich in narratives, resilience, and identity. This significance is what makes Hariharan's work so noteworthy. She does not craft fairy tales where everything concludes flawlessly. Instead, she candidly portrays the struggle of being a woman in a society that desires her to remain unseen.

By articulating the experiences of the silenced, Githa Hariharan's novels help illuminate the profound relationship between language, authority, and the physical body. They highlight that literature transcends mere imagination it encompasses justice as well. Through her characters, she underscores that voicing concerns, even softly, constitutes a form of defiance. In a world rife with injustice, even the smallest gestures of resistance hold value.

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