

Politics of Silence in The Thousand Faces of Night

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Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted politics of silence in Githa Hariharan's "The Thousand Faces of Night (1992)", a landmark feminist text in Indian English literature. The novel redefines silence not merely as muteness or passivity but as a deeply political and psychological phenomenon intertwined with patriarchy, cultural memory, and identity. Through the interconnected lives of Mayamma, Sita, and Devi, Hariharan examines how silence functions as both oppression and resistance, as well as how myths and traditions sanctify and perpetuate women's muteness. The paper also analyses the intergenerational transmission of silence, its reinterpretation through feminist perspectives, and its eventual transformation into a language of resistance and self-assertion.

Key words :-Silence, Voice, Resistance, Patriarchy, submission, internalized silence, Women empowerment, Oppression, Feminist, Perspective, Muteness, Intergenerational transmission.

Introduction

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) stands as a landmark of postcolonial feminist writing in Indian English literature. The novel traces the intertwined lives of three women—Devi, her mother Sita, and the elderly Mayamma—whose experiences of silence, suffering, and endurance reflect the broader cultural and patriarchal frameworks of Indian society. As scholars J. Yellaiah and G. Pratima observe, "Hariharan sensitively portrays the condition of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity, diligently capturing their split consciousness" (188). In her narrative, silence is not merely an absence of speech but a deeply political expression that embodies submission, control, resistance, and survival. By weaving ancient myths and folktales into the personal narratives of her characters, Hariharan exposes how silence has been glorified, imposed, and inherited across generations, while also emphasizing the urgent need for women to break its constraints.

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This paper explores the complex politics of silence in the novel, examining how it functions both as an instrument of patriarchal domination and as a potential site of resistance. It argues that silence reflects a legacy of generational suffering while also serving, at critical moments, as a strategic space for empowerment and self-assertion.

Silence as Patriarchal Imposition

In Hariharan's text, silence is largely depicted as an imposition deeply rooted in a patriarchal cultural ethos. Women are conditioned to remain silent in the face of injustice, as this muteness is culturally coded as a virtue synonymous with obedience, chastity, and endurance. Mayamma's life exemplifies this enforced silence; trapped in a loveless and violent marriage, she bears humiliation and abuse without protest. Similarly, Sita's existence is characterized by a quiet submission to her father's authority, reflecting a profound internalization of patriarchal control. Through these poignant portrayals, Hariharan reveals how patriarchal ideology weaponizes women's silence, transforming it into a primary tool for sustaining social control and compliance.

Intergenerational Transmission of Silence

Silence in *The Thousand Faces of Night* is not confined to individual experience; it operates as an inherited condition, passed down from one generation of women to the next. Mayamma, Sita, and Devi each embody a different stage in this cyclical transmission. Mayamma, bound by her mother's teachings of endurance, learns that tolerance and silence are the hallmarks of a "virtuous" woman. Sita, in turn, internalizes this patriarchal wisdom, believing that conformity ensures stability and respect within the family. Devi, however, represents a generational shift. Having witnessed the quiet suffering of her mother and grandmother, she grows increasingly aware of how silence perpetuates suffering. Her eventual rejection of this inherited muteness signifies a decisive break from passivity and a powerful assertion of selfhood.

Through these interlinked stories, Hariharan exposes how silence becomes institutionalized within domestic spaces and transmitted through cultural myths and moral instruction. The novel suggests that breaking this inherited silence requires both critical self-awareness and a courageous redefinition of womanhood beyond patriarchal expectations.

Myths, Folklore, and the Sanctification of Silence

Hariharan masterfully employs myths and folktales to expose how silence has been sanctified within cultural and religious memory. As S. Ramanathan notes, the novel acts as a “commemoration of Indian mythology.” The story of Gandhari, who blindfolds herself to share her husband’s blindness, epitomizes a silent, self-sacrificing devotion that has been idealized as the pinnacle of wifely virtue. Similarly, mythological figures such as Amba and Draupadi reveal the devastating consequences of women’s suppressed desires and voices within epic narratives. By reinterpreting these myths through a feminist lens, Hariharan not only critiques the cultural glorification of silence but also demonstrates how mythology itself becomes complicit in perpetuating the politics of muteness. Yet, in reframing these ancient tales, she simultaneously opens possibilities for reinterpretation and resistance, allowing long-silenced voices to re-emerge in new, subversive ways.

Domestic Silence as Invisible Violence

Hariharan situates silence primarily within the domestic sphere, a space traditionally viewed as a woman’s natural domain. However, she reveals how domestic silence functions as an insidious form of unspoken violence. Mayamma’s lifelong muteness reflects the cultural normalization of women’s endurance in marriage, where suffering is disguised as virtue. Devi, too, experiences this oppressive silence within the confines of her arranged marriage, as her individuality and aspirations are systematically subdued. As Tripti Garg argues, “the novel causes the reader’s encounter with the truth that how so ever the female gets educational capacities, how so ever the society may become modernized; but females will be exploited in all ages” (61). The novel thus exposes the oppressive underpinnings of so-called respectable households, where women’s pain is masked by a façade of harmony, devotion, and moral duty.

Silence as Resistance

Although silence frequently signifies submission, Hariharan also reimagines it as a potential site of resistance. When women consciously refrain from speaking in spaces where their voices would be dismissed or distorted, silence itself becomes a form of protest. This ambivalence makes it a powerful feminist trope, echoing the complex dynamic explored in Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Spivak questions whether the most marginalized can ever truly be heard within dominant discourses, a dilemma that creates a “violent aporia” where the subaltern is caught between silence and being spoken for. For Devi, silence

transforms into a moment of introspection and eventual rebellion. Unlike her predecessors, she refuses to be confined by inherited muteness; instead, she harnesses it as an act of self-assertion. By questioning the patriarchal myths and traditional expectations that have shaped her life, Devi redefines silence as a prelude to reclaiming her voice and identity. In doing so, Hariharan portrays silence not as the end of expression, but as the beginning of self-realization and empowerment.

Devi's Journey: Breaking Free from Silence

The heart of Hariharan's feminist project lies in Devi's journey. Unlike the women before her, Devi actively challenges the traditional stories and cultural norms that sanction silence. She uncovers the hidden harm of inherited muteness and, in a brave act of rebellion, chooses to speak. Her decision to leave her marriage shatters the generational pattern of silence, opening a path for women to define themselves on their own terms.

This personal rebellion illuminates the broader power dynamics at play. The novel reveals that silence is never neutral; it is a tool used by patriarchal systems to suppress women's voices. Hariharan meticulously exposes how this silence is constructed and maintained, showing it to be both a means of oppression and, when consciously reclaimed, a potent form of resistance. This duality is also embodied by Sita, who, after being insulted by her father-in-law, stops playing her musical instrument—a silence that itself becomes a form of protest. As K. Damodar Rao explains, in a dominant patriarchal society, women who are pitted against an oppressive system often turn their aggression inward, resulting in “self-inflicted wounds and penance.” This “hostility against oneself” is personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari. The novel's exploration of silence thus sheds critical light on larger questions of gender, power, and voice in post-colonial India.

Narrative Technique and Symbolism

Hariharan's narrative style powerfully reinforces her thematic exploration of silence. The non-linear structure, shifting perspectives, and interwoven myths create a fragmented yet poetic rhythm that mirrors the interrupted voices of women. Her use of pauses, ellipses, and reflective narration evokes the unspoken layers of women's inner consciousness.

In this way, silence operates not only as a theme but also as a structural principle. The spaces between words, the withheld emotions, and the rhythm of the

prose all suggest that what remains unsaid is often more revealing than speech itself. Hariharan thus turns narrative silence into a potent aesthetic and political device.

Comparative Perspective

Examining the politics of silence across Indian women's writing reveals nuanced variations on this theme. The journeys of Devi (Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*), Jaya (Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*), and Nanda Kaul (Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*) offer a compelling comparative study. Each woman's silence tells a distinct story of endurance, pain, and self-discovery.

Devi begins her journey shaped by the quiet suffering of her mother and grandmother. She has inherited a silence born from generations of women taught that being silent meant being good. Her story, however, is defined by questioning this inheritance. Her decision to leave her marriage is not just a physical rebellion but a meaningful reclamation of her voice from silence.

Jaya, in Deshpande's novel, embodies a silence forged in the crucible of middle-class domesticity. Her muteness is not violently imposed but internally constructed over years of striving to be the perfect wife and mother. Through writing and introspection, she realizes her silence has been a form of acquiescence, and she must break it to understand her own worth.

Nanda Kaul, from Desai's novel, represents a different form of silence: one of chosen isolation. After a life of fulfilling social duties, she retreats to the hills, her silence a protest against societal expectations. Yet, this chosen silence is revealed to be a complex blend of control and profound loneliness.

Together, these three characters illustrate a spectrum of silence: inherited (Devi), internalized (Jaya), and chosen (Nanda Kaul). Their stories demonstrate that silence is not monolithic; it can be a space of survival, reflection, and quiet resistance, helping women navigate a world that often seeks to quiet them.

Contemporary Relevance

Though published over three decades ago, *The Thousand Faces of Night* remains strikingly relevant. The mechanisms of silencing may have evolved, but the experience persists, migrating from the domestic sphere into workplaces, relationships, and digital spaces.

Where women were once told to be silent in the name of virtue, they now often self-silence for fear of professional repercussions, social judgment, or online

harassment. The central question is no longer simply whether women can speak, but whether they will be heard and believed. Hariharan's portrayal of women expected to "adjust" and "endure" still mirrors the lives of many, demonstrating patriarchy's ability to adapt its methods.

Yet, the potential for silence as resistance also endures. In an increasingly noisy world, the conscious choice to be silent can be an act of self-preservation and defiance. Movements like #MeToo have shown the explosive power of breaking silence, but they have also highlighted that the silence itself was a story—one of survival. Devi's journey—using silence for introspection before decisive action—feels profoundly modern. Understanding the politics of silence today means engaging with the constant struggle between speaking and being heard, a struggle that continues to define many women's lives across generations.

Conclusion

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan masterfully transforms silence from a simple symbol of subjugation into a complex site of power, protest, and self-discovery. Through the experiences of Mayamma, Sita, and Devi, she maps the shifting meanings of silence across generations—from inherited endurance to awakened resistance. The novel systematically dismantles the patriarchal glorification of female muteness while affirming the transformative potential of the voices that emerge from within that silence.

Ultimately, Hariharan's narrative insists that silence is never empty; it is saturated with memory, pain, and, most importantly, the possibility of renewal. By redefining silence as a language of resistance, *The Thousand Faces of Night* continues to inspire feminist re-readings of identity, agency, and the profound power of women's unspoken stories.

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