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## A PANORAMA OF INDIAN WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF GITHA HARIHARAN AND ANITA NAIR

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the multifaceted portrayal of Indian women in the select novels of Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair, two prominent voices in contemporary Indian English fiction. Through a close reading of Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, alongside Nair's *Ladies Coupé* and *Mistress*, this study explores the panoramic spectrum of female experience — from the entrapment of patriarchal structures to the gradual articulation of selfhood, resistance, and identity. Both authors, while rooted in distinct cultural and regional idioms, converge in their commitment to illuminate the inner lives of women negotiating tradition, modernity, desire, and freedom. Drawing on feminist literary theory, postcolonial perspectives, and narratological analysis, the article argues that Hariharan and Nair collectively construct a rich and layered panorama that challenges monolithic representations of Indian womanhood.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indian women, identity, patriarchy, feminist fiction, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair, postcolonial literature.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English literature has witnessed a significant surge in women's writing since the 1980s, a development that reflects both the increasing visibility of women in public life and the expanding terrain of feminist consciousness in postcolonial India. Among the many voices that have emerged, Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair occupy a distinctive place — not merely because of their literary excellence, but because of their sustained engagement

with the question of what it means to be a woman in a society caught between deep-rooted tradition and the imperatives of modernity.

Githa Hariharan, born in 1954, burst onto the literary scene with *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. Her fiction is characterized by its dense intertextual engagement with myth and folklore, its interrogation of patriarchal ideology embedded in classical Indian texts, and its unflinching exploration of the psychic costs borne by women under the weight of cultural expectation. Anita Nair, born in 1966 and writing in a more overtly accessible register, is best known for *Ladies Coupé* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005). Her narratives foreground women's quest for voice, autonomy, and self-definition, often deploying the journey — physical, emotional, and existential — as a structuring metaphor.

This article proposes to undertake a comparative study of these two authors through close reading of select novels, situating their female characters within the socio-cultural landscape of India and analyzing the strategies by which both authors resist, negotiate, and deconstruct patriarchal discourses. The panorama of women that emerges from their fiction is rich, contradictory, and deeply humane — encompassing the silenced daughter-in-law, the complicit mother, the rebellious artist, the aging widow, and the woman who, for the first time, dares to articulate her own desire.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The study draws on several intersecting theoretical frameworks. Feminist literary criticism, particularly the strand associated with French feminist theory (Simone de Beauvoir's conception of woman as the 'Other,' Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*), provides a foundational lens for understanding how Hariharan and Nair construct and disrupt gendered binaries. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's concept of the 'madwoman in the attic' — the repressed, dangerous feminine self kept under containment — finds resonance in several of the female characters across both authors' texts.

Postcolonial feminist theory, as articulated by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Uma Narayan, is equally essential. These theorists alert us to the dangers of universalizing Western feminist frameworks when applied to non-Western women, and they insist on the specificity of the colonial legacy in shaping gendered subjectivities in societies like India. Both Hariharan and Nair are acutely conscious of this specificity, grounding their female protagonists in historically and geographically particular circumstances.

Narratological concerns — voice, focalization, the structure of narrative time, the representation of interiority — also inform this analysis, since the formal choices made by both authors are themselves expressive of ideological commitments regarding who has the right to speak, whose inner life matters, and how women's experience can be rendered in language.

### **3. Githa Hariharan: Myth, Memory, and the Imprisoned Self**

#### ***3.1 The Thousand Faces of Night (1992)***

The *Thousand Faces of Night* opens with Devi, a young woman who has returned to India after completing her education in the United States. The novel's central dramatic movement is the tension between Devi's half-formed aspiration toward selfhood and the overwhelming gravitational pull of domestic obligation, embodied in her mother, her husband Mahesh, and above all in the mythological archetypes that shadow her every step.

Hariharan's use of myth is neither decorative nor nostalgic; it is critical and diagnostic. The novel is saturated with allusions to female figures from Hindu mythology — Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Gandhari — each of whom represents a mode of feminine sacrifice or endurance traditionally valorized by patriarchal culture. By weaving these mythological substrates into the texture of Devi's contemporary experience, Hariharan demonstrates the persistence and ideological function of such narratives: they do not merely reflect the past but actively produce and regulate femininity in the present.

Devi's mother Sita (significantly named) embodies the self-negating ideal of the devoted wife and mother. Her entire subjectivity has been subordinated to the needs of husband and home, and she regards this subordination not as oppression but as the natural order of things. She serves, in Beauvoirian terms, as the complicit Other — the woman who internalizes the patriarchal gaze and reproduces it in her own domestic governance. Devi's initial horror at this model of womanhood gradually modulates into something more complex: she comes to understand her mother not simply as a victim but as an agent whose choices, however constrained, have their own tragic dignity.

The character of Mayamma, an older woman who works in the household, offers yet another dimension to Hariharan's panorama. Mayamma's life — one of relentless labor, displacement, and quiet suffering — is rendered in fragments that constitute a counter-narrative to the main plot. Her stories from a forgotten oral tradition preserve female experiences that official culture has suppressed. In this sense, Hariharan positions subaltern women's oral narratives as

a repository of alternative knowledge, a form of resistance that is all the more powerful for operating beneath the threshold of visibility.

### ***3.2 The Ghost of Vasu Master (1994)***

In *The Ghost of Vasu Master*, Hariharan shifts her focus, and the central relationship is between a retired schoolteacher, Vasu, and his young charge Mani. Yet the novel is importantly inflected by female presence and absence. The absent women — mothers, wives, female students relegated to the margins — constitute a significant interpretive lacuna that the text invites the reader to interrogate. The women who do appear, however briefly, are constructed against the grain of conventional representation: they are curious, willful, and refuse the passivity that social scripts assign them.

Hariharan's technique of representing women's interiority through indirect narration — through what is withheld as much as what is stated — speaks to the epistemological challenges of representing female experience within a narrative tradition shaped by androcentric conventions. The silences and gaps in the text function as what Patricia Yaeger calls a 'honey-mad' space, a zone of feminine desire that overflows and exceeds the patriarchal text's attempt to contain it.

## **4. Anita Nair: Journey, Voice, and Female Solidarity**

### ***4.1 Ladies Coupé (2001)***

If Hariharan's fictional world is characterized by its density, its mythological weight, and its unflinching engagement with psychic interiority, Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* presents a more expansive, socially varied canvas. The novel is structured around a journey — a train journey across South India undertaken by Akhildeswari (Akhila), a forty-five-year-old unmarried government employee — and the stories told by the five women who share her compartment. The 'ladies coupé' of the title is a wonderfully suggestive space: a women-only railway compartment, a temporary refuge from the male-dominated world outside, a space in which women can speak freely and listen to each other's lives. Nair uses this liminal, transitional space as a narrative device that allows her to present six distinct female voices and their corresponding life histories, each illuminating a different aspect of women's experience in contemporary India.

Akhila's story is in some respects the most poignant. Having sacrificed her youth to supporting her widowed mother and siblings, she has arrived at middle age without having lived — without having chosen, desired, or self-determined. Her journey to Kanyakumari, the

southernmost tip of India, is at once a physical pilgrimage and an existential reckoning. The central question she poses to herself — 'Can a woman live alone?' — reverberates through the entire novel as both a personal and a political inquiry.

The stories told by the other five women in the compartment constitute Nair's panoramic gallery of Indian womanhood. Janaki represents the self-abnegating, devoted wife who has made a virtue of self-erasure. Margaret Shanthi, a Christian woman from Kerala, embodies the specific intersection of gender and religious community, her aspirations shaped and constrained by both. Sheela, barely twenty, represents the younger generation's more assertive negotiation of desire and independence. Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu complete the ensemble, each embodying further dimensions of female subjectivity — the woman who has managed to carve out economic independence, and the woman from a marginalized community whose suffering bears the additional weight of caste.

Nair's achievement in *Ladies Coupé* lies partly in this structural pluralism: by refusing to privilege any single narrative, she insists on the heterogeneity of female experience and resists the homogenizing tendencies of both mainstream feminism and traditional literary representation. The women's stories are not interchangeable; they are shaped by class, caste, religion, region, and generation. Yet they are also bound together by shared experiences of constraint, desire, and the yearning for self-determination.

#### ***4.2 Mistress (2005)***

*Mistress* is Nair's most formally ambitious novel, structured as a triptych of interwoven narratives that illuminate the classical South Indian dance form of Kathakali and the lives of those who inhabit its world. The three central consciousnesses are Koman, an aging master of Kathakali; his niece Radha, a woman caught between two men and two possible versions of herself; and Chris, an American researcher who has come to study the art form.

Radha occupies the most complex position in the novel's gender economy. She is the mistress of the title — a word that resonates with multiple meanings: she is, in one sense, in thrall to men who define her; but she is also, gradually, becoming the mistress of her own narrative. Her relationship with Chris unleashes desires and self-understandings that her domesticated existence with her husband Shyam had suppressed, and her uncle Koman's gradual revelation of his own life story opens her eyes to the complex inheritances — artistic, emotional, erotic — that have shaped her.

Nair uses the vocabulary of Kathakali — the *navarasas* or nine emotional states that the dancer must embody — as an organizing principle for the novel's exploration of affect and

feminine interiority. This is more than decorative; it constitutes a claim that women's emotional lives are as complex, as worthy of careful attention, and as susceptible to aesthetic rendering as any great art form. The traditional artistic vocabulary, so long dominated by male practitioners, is here reclaimed as a framework for understanding female experience.

The figure of Shyam, Radha's husband, is important for what it reveals about the specific forms of masculine power operative in contemporary middle-class India. He is not a monster; he is merely a man who has never questioned his entitlement to define the terms of his wife's existence. His bewilderment when Radha begins to assert her independence is not feigned — it reflects the genuine incomprehension of a man for whom patriarchal norms have always been so naturalised as to be invisible.

## **5. Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences**

### ***5.1 The Mythological Matrix***

Both Hariharan and Nair engage with the mythological and cultural inheritance of Indian womanhood, but they do so in different registers. Hariharan's engagement is denser, more allusive, more psychoanalytically charged — she excavates the foundational myths to expose the ideological work they perform in the production of femininity. Nair's approach is lighter, less overtly critical, but no less ultimately subversive: she appropriates the emotional vocabulary of classical art forms and reclaims it for women's experience.

What unites both authors is their refusal to treat the cultural tradition as either wholly oppressive or simply celebratory. They acknowledge the power, the beauty, and the genuine sustenance that tradition can provide, even as they expose its regulatory function. This nuanced doubleness — simultaneously inside and outside the tradition — marks their fiction as distinctly postcolonial feminist in its orientation.

### ***5.2 The Politics of Voice***

A central concern in both authors' work is the question of who speaks and who is heard. Hariharan often constructs narratives in which the female protagonist's voice is overlaid, interrupted, or submerged by other voices — the voices of myth, of mothers, of social expectation. The recovery of an authentic female voice is thus presented as a difficult, perhaps impossible, achievement — an aspiration toward which the text strains without ever fully arriving.

Nair, by contrast, more consistently grants her female characters the power of narrative. *Ladies Coupé* is structured as a polyphony of women's voices, each accorded equal dignity

and narrative space. This structural generosity is itself a feminist act, enacting in formal terms the principle of equal worth that the novel thematically advocates.

### ***5.3 The Body and Desire***

The representation of female desire — erotic, intellectual, existential — is a further point of comparison. Both authors are notably frank, by the standards of mainstream Indian English fiction, in their representation of women's erotic lives. Hariharan's treatment of desire tends to be more metaphorically mediated, encoded in dream sequences, mythological references, and the representation of female bodies engaged in domestic labor as sites of suppressed longing. Nair is more direct: Radha's erotic awakening in *Mistress* and the various women's reflections on marriage, sexuality, and satisfaction in *Ladies Coupé* are rendered with an openness that was, at the time of publication, genuinely transgressive in the Indian literary context.

This frankness is not gratuitous; it is politically motivated. To represent women's desire as real, complex, and legitimate — rather than as a problem to be managed, suppressed, or subordinated to reproductive duty — is to make a claim about the full humanity of women that patriarchal culture has consistently resisted.

### ***5.4 Female Solidarity and Sisterhood***

Both authors explore the possibilities and limitations of female solidarity. In *Ladies Coupé*, the women's compartment functions as a temporary community of mutual recognition and support, and Nair seems cautiously hopeful about women's capacity to sustain each other across differences of class, caste, and generation. Hariharan is more ambivalent: in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, women are as often complicit in each other's subordination as they are supportive — Devi's mother, her mother-in-law, the female neighbors who uphold the marriage system with as much invested interest as any man.

This divergence reflects a real tension in feminist thought between solidarity-based and power-analytical approaches to women's relationships. Hariharan, influenced by a more structuralist feminism, is alert to the ways in which patriarchal ideology recruits women as its agents. Nair, without ignoring these dynamics, grants more weight to the redemptive possibilities of women's mutual recognition.

## **6. Situating Hariharan and Nair within Indian Feminist Literary Discourse**

To fully appreciate the achievement of Hariharan and Nair, it is necessary to situate them within the broader landscape of Indian women's writing in English. The tradition includes figures such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, and Namita

Gokhale, each of whom has contributed to the expanding representation of women's experience in Indian English fiction. More recently, writers such as Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, and Meena Kandasamy have continued and complicated this tradition.

What distinguishes Hariharan and Nair within this constellation is, first, their sustained focus on regional specificity — Hariharan's engagement with Tamil Brahmin culture and Nair's anchoring in Kerala — which gives their portraits of women a particular density and credibility. Second, both authors are notable for the formal sophistication with which they handle female interiority: the stream-of-consciousness passages in Hariharan's early work and the multi-vocal structure of Nair's *Ladies Coupé* are evidence of a commitment to finding forms equal to the complexity of women's inner lives.

Shashi Deshpande, in novels such as *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), provides perhaps the closest precedent for Hariharan's introspective, psychologically dense representation of middle-class Indian women. But Hariharan's deeper engagement with myth and her more consistently critical stance toward patriarchal ideology mark a significant development of this tradition. Nair, in turn, extends Deshpande's and Hariharan's project into more socially diverse territory, incorporating women from different classes, castes, and regions and giving their stories equal narrative dignity.

### **7. Female Agency: Between Constraint and Self-Determination**

A question that haunts both authors' fiction is the degree to which their female characters can be said to exercise genuine agency — to act rather than simply react, to choose rather than simply submit. This question is theoretically vexed: feminist scholars have argued about the relationship between structure and agency, between the determining force of patriarchal ideology and the irreducible human capacity for resistance and self-creation.

Hariharan's fiction tends toward a tragic or at best ambiguous view of female agency. Devi's trajectory in *The Thousand Faces of Night* ends not in triumphant liberation but in a kind of disappearance — she leaves her husband and her home, but where she goes and what she becomes are left deliberately uncertain. This narrative openness is honest about the difficulty of women's situation: it refuses the consoling fable of individual liberation while also refusing the equally consoling fable of complete determination.

Nair's vision is, on balance, more hopeful. Akhila's decision to travel alone, to confront her accumulated life and its unrealized possibilities, is presented as a genuine act of self-recovery. Radha's partial awakening in *Mistress* — her refusal to continue accepting a life lived on others' terms — is rendered with cautious but real affirmation. Yet Nair does not

idealize: the social structures that have constrained her characters remain in place at the novels' ends, and the reader is left with an awareness that individual transformation, however necessary, is not sufficient.

Both authors, in different ways, suggest that the most meaningful form of female agency available to women in the contexts they depict is not the dramatic assertion of radical freedom but the quieter, more persistent work of articulation — the work of finding language for experiences that have been systematically rendered unspeakable, of telling stories that have been systematically suppressed. This is, appropriately enough, also the work performed by the novels themselves.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The panorama of Indian women that emerges from the select novels of Githa Hariharan and Anita Nair is one of remarkable breadth and depth. Across the full spectrum of their fiction — from the mythologically saturated household of *The Thousand Faces of Night* to the intercultural dialogue of *Mistress*, from the psychologically complex silences of *The Ghost of Vasu Master* to the polyphonic journey of *Ladies Coupé* — both authors construct a vision of Indian womanhood that is insistently plural, historically specific, and humanly complex.

Hariharan and Nair work in different registers and with different emphases, but they converge in their fundamental commitment: to take women's inner lives seriously, to expose the mechanisms of patriarchal constraint without reducing their characters to passive victims, and to insist on the full humanity of women whose stories mainstream culture has marginalized or silenced. Their fiction does not offer easy resolutions; it inhabits the difficult space between the world as it is and the world as it might be, and it does so with intelligence, compassion, and formal artistry.

The panorama they collectively create is not a static image but a dynamic one — full of movement, contradiction, and the ceaseless struggle of consciousness to understand and, perhaps, to transform the conditions of its own existence. In this sense, both authors' work participates in the larger feminist project of reimagining not only what Indian women's lives look like, but what they could look like: a project at once literary, political, and profoundly human.

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