



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64672/IJIFR/26.02.13.6.024>

Published on: February 26, 2026

WOMEN, STORYTELLING, AND PUSHBACK: GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE NOVELS OF GITHA HARIHARAN

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ABSTRACT: *This paper takes a deep look at the work of Githa Hariharan through a feminist lens, focusing on her novels *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, and *Time of Siege*. The study explores how Hariharan portrays the lives of women within complex systems like patriarchy, caste, power in institutions, and nationalistic ideas. Using feminist literary theory, postcolonial feminism, and the idea of intersectionality, the paper shows that Hariharan's stories not only reveal how gender discrimination works in society but also show how storytelling itself can be a form of resistance. She looks into how traditional family roles, being left out of professional opportunities, old myths, and community conflicts affect women's lives. Through this, she shows how women's experiences are broken but also strong and capable of change. The paper highlights that Hariharan's writing techniques, like using many voices, rethinking myths, and focusing on inner thoughts, are ways to fight against the dominant structures in families, governments, and culture. In the end, her novels show that storytelling is a powerful way to bring back forgotten stories and create new, better possibilities for women.*

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Women's agency, Discrimination, Violence, Nationalism, Freedom of Education, Caste, Class, and Community.*

PAPER CITATION:

Mythili, R.: "Women, Storytelling, and Pushback: Gender Inequality in the Novels of Githa Hariharan", *International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR)*, Vol.(13) (6), February 2026, pp. 812-820. IJIFR Paper ID: 2026/02/IJIFR /V13/E6/024.

<https://doi.org/10.64672/IJIFR/26.02.13.6.024>



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1. INTRODUCTION

Githa Hariharan is a writer and scholar known for her work on gender discrimination, feminist literary criticism, Indian English fiction, patriarchy, intersectionality, women's agency, and narrative resistance. In India, gender discrimination is a big problem that affects women and people of other genders in many areas of life. This discrimination has been around for a long time and is deeply connected to the idea that men should be in charge, which is called patriarchy. This idea is supported by family, religion, caste, and the government. It leads to women and gender minorities not having the same chances as men in education, jobs, healthcare, owning property, and making decisions. Even though there are laws that say everyone should be treated equally, social norms still make men more important and women and other genders less valued. Traditionally, in India, men have been seen as the main leaders in families and society.

This idea comes from old religious texts and traditions that give men more power. When British people ruled India, there were discussions about things like widows burning themselves alive (sati), marrying as children, and widows getting married again. People like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar pushed for changes to improve women's rights, but even then, women were often seen as symbols of tradition rather than as individuals who can make their own choices. Today, gender discrimination is still a big issue in India. Even with more education for women, there are still more men who can read and write. Women don't get to work as often as men, and when they do, they often get paid less. Things like giving money as a dowry, preferring boys over girls, and even stopping girls from being born show how much society values boys more than girls. Violence against women, like abuse at home, harassment, and even killings for being disrespectful, shows how unsafe and powerless women often feel because of the way men have always been in control.

Gender discrimination in India is connected with other factors like caste, class, religion, and whether someone lives in a rural or urban area. Women from poorer or less powerful groups face more difficulties because they are excluded from society and economic opportunities. For example, Dalit and Adivasi women often suffer from both caste-based and gender-based violence, showing that we need to look at how different forms of discrimination work together to create inequality. At the same time, India has had many feminist movements and changes in the law.

The Indian Constitution says everyone is equal before the law and stops discrimination based on gender. There are also laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), and rules about workplace harassment that aim to fix unfair treatment. Local activism, women's groups, and better education have also helped women gain more control over their lives. However, just having laws that say everyone is equal doesn't mean people treat each other equally. Old ideas about men being in charge still affect how women are seen and treated in daily life. These ideas shape what women are expected to do, how mobile they can be, what they can do with their bodies, and how much they can work. So, gender discrimination in India exists both in the way systems are built and in the beliefs people have inside themselves. In writing and cultural studies, gender discrimination is a big topic.

Writers show how women deal with unfair systems and fight back. Indian English novelists especially look at the struggle between old traditions and new ways of living, between taking care of the home and wanting to work, and between staying quiet and standing up for themselves. Through these stories, literature helps start important discussions about fairness, equality, and change in Indian society. In short, gender discrimination in India is a complicated issue that comes from history, culture, and economic conditions. Even though there have been some improvements through laws and social changes, there are still big inequalities that need more attention and action from everyone.

In the late 1900s, a new wave of Indian women writers started writing in English, which changed how people talk about gender issues in literature. Earlier stories often showed women as symbols of sacrifice, tradition, and morality, but these new writers started to question those ideas. One of these writers is Githa Hariharan, who has a special place in this movement.

Githa Hariharan is a well-known writer from India who focuses on feminist ideas, retells myths, and explores topics like gender, identity, and nationalism in postcolonial India. She was born in 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and grew up in different cities. She studied at the University of Bombay, now called University of Mumbai, and later earned a postgraduate degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University in the United States. Her writing career took off with her first book, "The Thousand Faces of Night" (1992), which won a major award called the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. This book retells Indian myths from a feminist perspective and looks at how women are limited by traditional beliefs about men.

Some of her other important books are:

- When Dreams Travel – A new version of "The Arabian Nights" that focuses on women's voices and power.
- In Times of Siege – A political story about nationalism, freedom of education, and how history is remembered.
- Fugitive Histories – Set during times of conflict and community tension in India.
- I Have Become the Tide – Explores how caste discrimination affects people and the movements against it.

Githa Hariharan's writing often deals with:

- Gender inequality and control by men
- The role of myths in understanding women
- Personal identity and self
- Religious and community divisions
- How history and memory are shaped

She is also involved in activism. In 1999, she fought against unfair laws that limited a mother's rights in legal matters, and she won a major Supreme Court case that helped make the law fairer for womanist Hariharan holds an important position in Indian English literature because she does a lot of things that make her work unique.

She retells old myths from the point of view of women, gives a voice to people who are often ignored, and mixes beautiful writing with a critical look at society and politics. Her books are widely used in universities, especially in classes that study feminism, postcolonialism, gender, and Indian writing in English. In India, discrimination against women happens in both obvious and hidden ways. Even though there have been legal changes and better education, strong traditional attitudes still affect how women move around, express their sexuality, and think for themselves. Literature plays a big role in showing these issues. Hariharan's novels show how this discrimination continues not just through direct violence, but also through everyday actions that support unfair gender roles. These roles are found in myths, marriage, workplaces, and national stories.

This research paper looks at how women and gender discrimination are shown in three of Hariharan's major novels.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The paper wants to answer these questions:

- I. How does Hariharan show gender discrimination in homes, institutions, and political areas?
- II. What ways do her female characters find to take control within a system that is not fair to women?
- III. How do the stories she tells act as a form of resistance against patriarchy?
- IV. How does the idea of intersectionality, which looks at how different aspects of identity like race, class, and gender affect people, change how we see gender in her writing?

By carefully looking at the texts and using different theories, this paper argues that Hariharan's novels create a voice that challenges traditional ideas about men and women, and gives women the power to tell their own stories.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses feminist literary criticism as its main way of understanding the texts, along with postcolonial feminist theory and the idea of intersectionality. Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" shows how gender roles are created by society. Hariharan's stories show this process, showing how girls are shaped by myths, family, and the education system into people who follow rules.

Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity helps us understand how femininity is created through repeated actions, like wedding ceremonies, daily chores, and modesty rules. These actions make it seem like being a woman is natural, but they actually support unfair treatment.

(i) Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity

Judith Butler says:

- Gender is not something you are born with.
- It is something you do.
- It is performed through actions, speech, behavior, and how you dress.
- These repeated performances make people believe that gender is natural.

According to Butler, society pushes people to follow certain gender roles through rules and punishments. People who don't fit these roles face being shunned, criticized, or even harmed. So, gender discrimination happens when people are forced to follow strict rules of how to be a man or a woman.

(ii) Application to Githa Hariharan's Novels

Hariharan's novels show how Butler's theory works in real life. Her female characters are always forced to act in ways that are considered acceptable for women in a male-dominated society.

In "The Thousand Faces of Night", Devi grows up listening to stories about women who are obedient and willing to sacrifice. These stories act like a guidebook for how to behave as a woman.

Butlerian Reading:

- Devi is taught to act like the perfect wife.
- Marriage becomes a situation where she has to show she is submissive, quiet, and controlled in her emotions.
- Her sense of self is built not from her own desires but from repeating actions that society says are proper for women.
- When Devi finally leaves her marriage, she breaks the cycle of acting like the perfect woman.

According to Butler, this breaking of routine shows that gender roles are made up, not natural.

So, gender discrimination in the novel happens because of:

- What society expects from women
- Myths passed down through culture
- Pressure from family

Institutional Gender Regulation in "The Ghosts of Vasu Master" "In "The Ghosts of Vasu Master", women who work professionally, like Lakshmi Rao, face unfair treatment in educational settings. Butler explains that society sets rules for how women should act. Women who act too confidently or too independently are punished.

In the novel:

- Lakshmi's skills challenge the power of men.
- People doubt her ability to do her job well.
- Her personality is questioned.

She is not punished for not doing her job but for not acting like a quiet, obedient woman.

The school becomes a place where gender roles are enforced. This shows Butler's idea that gender norms are kept in place through watching and controlling how people behave.

(iii) Gender and Nationalism in In Times of Siege: In "In Times of Siege", women are connected to the idea of what a nation is. In Butler on Gender and Power, Butler says that ideas about

gender are connected to bigger political systems. The government often creates an idea of what a perfect woman should be to keep control.

(iv) In the novel:

- Women are seen as protectors of culture.
- Their bodies become symbols of tradition.
- Their freedom is less important than the nation's identity.
- Here, treating women badly is part of politics.
- They are valued in symbols but not in real life

(v) Repetition and Resistance

According to Butler, resistance happens when people break the usual ways of showing gender.

In Hariharan's fiction:

- Devi leaves her marriage.
- Women speak about experiences that are hidden.
- Myth stories are looked at differently.

These actions shake up the usual ideas about what a woman should be. By not repeating the old patterns, women show that the rules of patriarchy are not natural. Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality is especially useful. In Hariharan's fiction, being treated unfairly because of gender is connected with other things like caste, class, and community. Women's experiences depend on their social and economic situation, but all are limited by the same patriarchal rules. Postcolonial feminism, as discussed by people like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, questions the idea that all women in the "Third World" are the same.

Hariharan's fiction stops people from seeing all women as the same by showing the different stories of women in specific cultural settings.

4. GENDER AND MYTHIC CONDITIONING IN "THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT"

"The Thousand Faces of Night" by Githa Hariharan is a strong feminist book that shows how myths and gender together shape women's lives in a patriarchal Indian society. The novel mixes real life with stories from myths to show how cultural stories create and control what it means to be a woman. Hariharan doesn't just tell old stories; she changes how they're told to show how they help keep unfair ideas about women alive.

(i) Myth as a Way to Teach Gender Roles

Devi grows up listening to myths told by her grandmother. These stories come from ancient texts and religious traditions. They praise women who are kind, patient, and willing to suffer.

Myth becomes:

- A way to teach right and wrong
- A picture of what a perfect woman should be
- A reason for women to accept pain

By hearing these stories again and again, young girls learn to think that being quiet and strong is what makes a woman good. In this way, myths help keep women in a lower place in society

Characters like:

- Sita
- Savitri

Show loyalty, purity, and love. These women are seen as the best examples of how real women should act. In the novel: Devi is expected to act like these characters. Marriage means being patient and giving up personal happiness. Feelings of sadness or anger must be kept inside.

(ii) Marriage as a Myths Goal

The story treats marriage not just as a way to live, but as a destiny that women are meant to follow.

Some of the rules about gender in the story include:

- A woman's joy comes from being married.
- Being obedient brings peace.
- wife becomes part of her husband's life.

Devi's arranged marriage fits this idea, but the loneliness she feels shows how different life is from the stories. Hariharan shows how myths make marriage sound wonderful while ignoring how much control they put on women.

Quietness and Suffering as Good Traits

Another part of the myth is making silence and endurance seem like good things.

Women like Mayamma face bad treatment but rarely speak up.

Silence is seen as:

- Power
- Superiority
- Steadfastness

But Hariharan shows that this silence lets pain and injustice continue. The myths teach women to accept what happens to them instead of fighting back

Myths and Women's Feelings

Old stories often hide women's personal desires, seeing strong women as bad or wrong.

In the novel:

- Devi's thoughts and feelings are ignored.
- Her dreams for the future don't fit with what society expects of her.

Hariharan brings attention to Devi's inner conflicts, which makes people wonder why women's desires are always seen as something to control.

(iv) Changing Myths to Fight Back

Although myths are used to control women, Hariharan uses them to challenge unfair ideas.

She Changed stories to show women's points of view & said more about women who aren't often heard. She has given new meanings to old myths.

Generational Transmission of Gender Myths

The novel shows three generations—Mayamma, Sita, and Devi—each influenced by myths in different ways.

- Mayamma accepts her oppression.
- Sita deals with limits as best as she can.
- Devi starts to question and finally resists.

This change across generations shows a slow shift in how women think about themselves.

(v) Intersection of Myth and Social Reality

Hariharan shows that myths are not just old stories; they are part of everyday life today.

Even in educated urban families, they still: Expect women to sacrifice. Give more power to men. Control what women can do. So, myths are deeply connected to how society works.

The Thousand Faces of Night tells the stories of three generations of women—Devi, her mother Sita, and Mayamma. The novel mixes mythological tales with real-life experiences, showing how myths act as tools to control behavior.

From a young age, Devi learns about mythic women who are obedient and willing to suffer. These stories act like lessons that shape her beliefs. Myths become a quiet but strong way to support gender inequality, making suffering seem like a sign of being a good woman. Marriage in the novel is a key example of how men control women. Devi's arranged marriage keeps her trapped in traditional roles. Her smart ideas are ignored, and her feelings are not understood. Marriage is shown as a way to keep women quiet and obedient.

Mayamma's sad life shows the harsh effects of being economically and socially dependent. Her story highlights how being a woman can lead to both emotional and physical harm. Through

Mayamma, Hariharan shows that the harm caused by men's power is both seen and felt. But the novel doesn't end with defeat.

Devi's decision to leave her husband is a big change. This step shows her taking back control of her story. Importantly, the novel doesn't paint rebellion as something easy or perfect. It shows that fighting back has challenges and isn't always a clear win. Resistance is seen as a continuous process, not a single victory.

5. INSTITUTIONAL PATRIARCHY IN "THE GHOSTS OF VASU MASTER"

In "The Thousand Faces of Night" looks at domestic patriarchy, "The Ghosts of Vasu Master" focuses on institutional structures. Educational settings, often seen as forward-thinking, are actually deeply affected by gender issues. Lakshmi Rao is a highly educated woman who faces a difficult work environment. Even though she has strong qualifications, she deals with harassment and unfair attacks on her character.

Institutional patriarchy works through silence and support from the system. Male leaders use rules and procedures to make women's complaints seem invalid. The novel shows how reputation can be used as a tool. Women's words are always questioned, while men's mistakes are ignored. This is a form of gender discrimination called epistemic injustice, where women's knowledge and experiences are not taken seriously.

Hariharan criticizes how male-dominated ideas shape intellectual authority. Schools and universities, instead of being equal spaces, help keep old power structures in place. Through this, the novel broadens the feminist view beyond just the home.

In "The Ghosts of Vasu Master", Githa Hariharan gives a clear look at how gender discrimination affects relationships, roles, and personal freedom, especially for women. The story takes place in a school, which lets Hariharan show how subtle and clear forms of sexism work through the way characters interact and their views on tradition, power, and gender roles. Significance of Gender Discrimination in the Narrative By placing gender discrimination in the everyday life of a school, Hariharan:

- Reveals how sexism can be normal in places that are supposed to be progressive, like schools and education systems. Shows how gender bias works quietly instead of openly, through small actions and expectations that keep inequality going.
- Makes readers think about the unfair power structures based on gender.

In "Ghosts of Vasu Master", gender discrimination isn't just shown as personal bias but as a bigger problem that affects how people are respected at work, how authority is seen, and how individuals express themselves.

Hariharan's careful storytelling makes readers realize how sexism can stay hidden in everyday situations, changing how people relate to each other and supporting old ideas about men being in charge.

"In Times of Siege" puts gender in the middle of heated political conflicts. The book shows how nationalist ideas use women's bodies to stand for tradition and cultural purity. Women are seen as protectors of heritage, but they aren't given a say in political matters. Gender discrimination works through beliefs that force women into roles of moral symbols.

Hariharan shows how community tensions make women more vulnerable. Women are pushed to the side both because they come from minority groups and because of the traditional roles they are expected to follow in their homes. The pressure from politics and family life makes their situation even harder. The book uses many different voices to break apart simple nationalist stories. Women's stories help correct old misunderstandings and offer new ways to look at identity.

In both novels, gender discrimination doesn't happen alone.

It mixes with other problems like:

- depending on others financially

- being treated differently because of your caste
- being part of a certain religion
- not having access to education

Hariharan doesn't split things into just victims and those who hurt them. Instead, she shows women as part of complicated social groups. Even women who have some advantages, like education, might still face limits because of what is expected of them in marriage. Women who are already left out face even more difficulties. So, understanding how different forms of discrimination work together are key to seeing Hariharan's feminist ideas clearly a myth revisionism. By changing how myths are told, Hariharan challenges traditional cultural stories. Instead of just following old myths, she makes them a place where people can argue and question.

Interior Monologue

The focus on what women think inside counters the way history has ignored their voices. Readers get to see thoughts that were once kept hidden.

Fragmented Structure

The stories are not in a straight line, which shows how women's identities are broken up by different pressures and expectations. Through these methods, the story itself becomes a form of resistance.

Comparative Perspective

When we look at other writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Mahasweta Devi, Hariharan stands out because she mixes myth retelling with political ideas. While Deshpande looks at everyday life and Desai explores deep feelings, Hariharan brings in bigger social and political issues. Her stories connect personal experiences with society as a whole, showing how unfair treatment of women happens everywhere in life.

- Silence, Voice, and Agency
- Silence is a big theme in her books.
- Women are taught to stay quiet and not speak up. But silence is also shown as a moment for thinking before speaking.
- Voice is powerful.

When characters like Devi leave, or Lakshmi Rao stands up, or when people tell stories in *In Times of Siege*, speaking out is a way to gain freedom. But Hariharan doesn't present a simple happy ending. She shows that having power is not always easy, and it depends on many factors like domesticity and spatial politics. Space has symbolic meaning. Homes can feel like places of limitation, but they can also be places of safety. Workplaces offer freedom but often support traditional male roles. Public spaces can make women feel watched and judged.

Hariharan shows how gender discrimination is connected to the way we organize space.

She shows that the way we divide up space is influenced by gender.

- Reimagining Female Subjectivity
- Hariharan does not show women as simply victims.
- Her characters are thoughtful, questioning, and smart. Even when they are trapped, they have inner strength and independence.
- This shows that women in some parts of the world are not all the same.
- Their thoughts and feelings can change and grow.

The Politics of Storytelling

Hariharan's writing shows how telling stories is a way to challenge unfair power.

Stories shape how we see the world. By rewriting old stories and history, women take control of how their experiences are shared. Storytelling becomes a way to fight back against the dominant ideas that support unfair treatment of women.

6. CONCLUSION

Hariharan's novels offer a strong critique of how gender inequality is built into everyday life, institutions, and national ideas. Through her work, we can see that patriarchy uses many ways to control people – including stories, marriage, work roles, and the way we think. But her books do more than just show how people are treated unfairly. They show how women can fight back through stories and by expressing their own voices. By focusing on women's experiences, she turns literature into a tool for change. Her books are still very important in modern India, where discussions about fairness for women are ongoing. They remind us that changing the way we think is just as important as changing the laws.

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