

# Longing for Happiness in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*



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## Abstract

*The ultimate aim of life is to achieve happiness. Everyone works towards their goal in pursuit of happiness even though they struggle through various hardships. Motivation provides them with energy and keeps them moving in their life. An individual can be distinguished by their established need and how their unmet need impacts their major decision. This paper attempts to examine the position of the characters according to the Hierarchy of Needs by Abraham Maslow in *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan. It will depict the importance of completing those needs in the life of the characters. The impact of those failures on other activities of life. And how they employ various techniques to fulfill their needs. Throughout, motivation helps them to move forward in life. Githa Hariharan has constructed a universal theme, taking from ordinary life. She does not provide a hero figure but a representation of common life. The impact of the character's unfulfilled needs and the energy through which they survive and succeed in Githa Hariharan's novels, through the lens of the Hierarchy of Needs by Maslow.*

**Keywords:** Motivation, Needs, Maslow's Theory, Self-Esteem, Self-Actualisation

## Introduction

The novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, revolves around the life of three main characters –Devi, highly educated; Sita, her caring mother and Mayamma, the house-help, and cook. It represents three different generations through three different Indian women. Although they are different due to the gulf of caste and time still they strive to establish their own identity. It's the story of suffering within the four walls of their houses. The novel is divided into three parts focusing solely on the lives of the main female characters. It takes us from the present to the past and back to the present of the characters in their web-like relationships. It provides us with an understanding of their decisions and behavior of the present time. All the characters can be traced in the different stages of the hierarchy. Such positioning of the

character will help to understand the psyche and reasoning of decisions in their lives. They behave and perform according to their unsettled needs and desires. Devi belongs to a conventional South Indian Brahmin cultured family and goes to the U.S. to pursue her higher education. This suggests that the basic two needs; physiological and safety needs are accomplished by her character.

At the beginning of the novel, we are acquainted with Devi's mental state and suffering. She is an educated and modern woman in the novel. In the first chapter, we can analyze her relationship with Dan as well as with the foreign country. Her life in a foreign country is different from her homeland. There, she finds a sense of freedom and her own identity as an individual which was absent from her life earlier. As she is packing her bags for her return to India. She is accompanied by a "hectic

euphoria" (Hariharan 2) and "thought very little of what lay ahead". There is a sense of loneliness and a lack of warmth for her in that foreign country. Every time, when she imagines her relationship with Dan, she perceives it as "blurred regions of fantasy" (Hariharan 3). It is not difficult for Devi to satisfy her need for warmth from Dan but the only gap in their relationship is their culture. She regards herself and feels like a stranger who is different and unfit for Dan and his culture. Her dream "shattered every time she met Dan with his friends". She is never able to fit herself in his circle and interest. Maybe, it is her "burden of Indianness" (Hariharan 4) that made her feel different from others. This is a major reason for her to return to her own country as she might feel a sense of belongingness with her people.

In the preceding chapters, we can observe the main reasons for the void of love and belongingness in her life. She explains her relationship with her mother which lacks the touch of motherly nurturing for her. She discloses her life at her home in Madras and states how she and her mother use to live an isolated life from each other. It is not just the wall that separated them but the reserved emotions that isolated them from each other immensely. It is not like, that her mother did not provide her with any love, Sita, did everything to provide a comfortable life for her daughter. Her mother assured her that they lead a comfortable life after her father's demise but she lacked in providing emotional support in life. She reveals how all her friends use to share a friendly bond with their mothers. As they "chatted about boyfriends, they quarreled, they kissed. I remember a weekend I spent with my friend, Julie. We were driving back to the campus Sunday evening, and before we left, Julie hugged her mother and said casually, 'I love you, Mom!' I remember my deep embarrassment as if I had seen an embrace between lovers" (Hariharan 13). This instance suggests Devi's inability to connect with her mother with love.

Her relationship with her grandmother is also very essential to understand the core of her character. It is observed that she was a fantasy-driven

girl, whose life in childhood revolved around the mythical stories narrated by her grandmother. She was mesmerized by the strength and power of the characters from Indian epics like Amba, Uma, Draupadi, Gandhari, and many more. She identified herself with them as a great warrior who believed in fighting all hardships. She use to console herself that a prince will come to her rescue and will take her away.

We can observe, the nostalgia of Devi towards her childhood memories. She finds a different kind of solace in reliving those memories in her head. Again and again, she goes back to the memories of her grandmother and her visits to her house. That was the only place, where Devi felt warmth and completeness which was not available to her at her Madras house. At her grandmother's house, she never needed to "look at a mysterious, unknown world outside." (Hariharan 27)

Through the flashback in memory, we discover that after a certain age, Devi started avoiding everyone including her grandmother. She entered the life of reality and was no longer satisfied with the stories of fantasy. She assumed herself as a woman and not just a girl. Everything changed after her grandmother's demise. She parted from her parents to study in America. And it was at this moment she realized, she will never have a home again.

For Devi, marriage is an alternative technique to fulfill her unaccomplished need for warmth and a sense of belonging. She expects her prince charming to provide her with the love she always craves. When she is asked to choose her life partner, she chooses Mahesh, a regional Manager of a Multi-national company. Her sole reason to marry him is "Mahesh's frankness, his willingness to be fair" (Hariharan 22). Along with that, she also desires some emotional support and comprehension on his part as her husband. But such yearning is never recognized by Mahesh. After marriage, her life changes completely. Now, she is supposed to live a new life with new experiences, new people, and new feelings. She starts questioning the force which made her agree to marry, "was it trust, foolishness, or a reckless courage that made me agree to this intimacy?" (Hariharan 49).

Another initiative taken by Devi to eliminate her loneliness is by joining Tara's painting classes. It was Mahesh's idea to join such classes to make Devi's life more productive. Tara is Ashok's wife who works for Mahesh. Mahesh always admired Tara's boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm. She welcomes Devi with an open heart and is thrilled to include her. She is introduced to all the other members of the group but all this activity is tiring for Devi, mentally. As she says, when she came back home and "I looked into the mirror and saw a pale, drooping figure, almost as lifeless as the stuffed bird, a grotesque study in still-life" (Hariharan 57). This reveals the mental state of Devi as a lonely character who is craving someone's love and care.

The emptiness of life leads her to pass the time by wandering in dusty rooms filled with cockroaches. These empty rooms symbolize the void condition of Devi's life. They are full of "cobwebs, and a fine layer of black crumbs, like dregs from the past; and the familiar, musty smell of something stale and forgotten" (Hariharan 59). This statement shows how dull and different Devi's married life is from her expectations. She tries to connect herself with the memories of the house if not able to attach to the people in it.

Baba's presence in Devi's life plays an important role. He provides her with invisible support through his quiet presence at home. Baba is different from the other family members. He is attentive toward Devi and her talk. He is described as an attractive old man. He is not interested in the material world. His room is spacious and the walls are covered with citations and certificates. He is a man of wisdom and reverence. He fed Devi with the crumbs of music and the composer's devotion. He opens another gate of imagination for her by narrating stories/ his stories which are different from her grandmother's tales. Her grandmother's stories were like preludes for a woman but his stories defined the limits for a woman. With Baba's presence in the home, Devi found a temporary replacement for Mahesh's absence from her life.

The relationship with Gopal stands as another trial in Devi's life to satisfy her needs. She got

attracted by Gopal's music. It is his music that provides her with some relief. She feels freshness under her spine through art. It makes her forget all her worries as she starts feeling a higher passion beyond this materialistic world. She starts visiting his concerts regularly to experience the unleashed power of his voice. Their meetings become more frequent and intimate in nature. She is enchanted by him because of her unhappy married life. Maybe, this is her other technique to cope with the lack of warmth or it can also be her escape from the current situation. And she decides to leave everything behind and move ahead with Gopal. She starts living with Gopal as his muse. But soon she realizes her position in Gopal's life as nothing but a little figure in mirror studded buttons of his Kurta.

Sita is a character who approaches life practically. She manages her home and her family with her rational thinking. She encountered many challenges on her way in the past, but still stand strong and stable. She derives positive emotions from her daily chores and is satisfied with whatever is given to her. She is fulfilled in her role by being a housewife. Other than her capabilities of being a good wife, she is an excellent veena player. But once in the household, her father-in-law scolded her for wasting time on the veena. Instead of being emotionally heartbroken, she broke the strings of her veena. This suggests her practical point of view toward life. She dedicated herself to the responsibilities of the family. Her relationship with Mahadevan, her husband, and her relatives reveals her strong character. She "ruled with an iron hand. She thought for all three of them" (Hariharan 105).

After Mahadevan's death, everyone looked at her with eyes of pity. But she was a rebel who fought against all the odds. Her main responsibility was to provide her daughter with good values and morals. Nothing was more important than her family's well-being. After marriage of Devi, she returned to her favorite sport of playing the veena. She uses the art form as a technique to reach beyond her capabilities. She accomplishes all her duties and is prepared to find herself

again. This incident is more than her well-being, she is interested in finding the meaning out of her life. We can position Sita as a character on the topmost tier of the hierarchy of needs. She is self-sufficient in every manner and wants to go beyond her boundaries.

Mayamma is another significant character in the novel. She provides support in the married life of Devi along with Baba. She is always there for Devi in her loneliness by sharing different experiences within the house. They use to talk for hours about various things. She acquaints her with the members of the family. She is merely a maid in that house but never hopes for anything more in life. Her life became miserable, the moment she left her house to live with her husband. Her husband was a little crooked in nature as he left school and started gambling. She never protested against her husband for having illicit relationships. She recalls how he use to beat her until her skin turned black and blue whenever he found her singing in the house.

On the other hand, her mother-in-law continuously harassed and humiliated her. Before approving her for the marriage, she closely examined her body to check for any hidden deformities. She was never satisfied with what Mayamma provided to them. She started complaining about her inability to provide them with an heir. She pointed out her eating habits and barrenness. She was tortured and abused by both, her husband and her mother-in-law.

After such hard luck, she was blessed with a child on the day of Diwali. Her perseverance gave her the fruit but this was not the end of her suffering. Meanwhile, her husband left her by taking all their savings away. Contrary to her prayers, her son was nothing good but a devil in her life. He threatened to beat and sold her last gold bangles. But he was her only hope in life. She was beaten by an iron frying pan when she refused to give her diamond earrings. This situation reflects the lack of security in one's own house. Throughout her life, Mayamma is providing for others and not for herself. In the end, we can observe that she is happy in satisfying her security needs only.

Parvatimma does not exist as a living character in the novel. She is described vividly through her photographs and memories. She is presented as an epitome of purity and grace. The physical feature of her thinking processes is described in the words of Mayamma. She was loved by all and it was Parvatiamma who provided Mayamma with a place to live. After sending her children to boarding school, she devoted herself to the supreme power. As it is described, "She fasted, she did every puja I have ever heard of her voice was weak, but how clear, how pure and sweet it was" (Hariharan 63). Her needs for warmth, as well as self-esteem, were fulfilled in her home through her family. When she completed her duties, she sensed that it was time to explore the other world in search of supreme and left. Parvatiamma as a character can be positioned on the highest level of the Hierarchy, i.e., Self-Actualisation, the topmost tier. She stripped herself of the life allotted to her. It was her ambition that made her step out of the cocoon to live a more satisfying and inspiring life.

Mahesh can be described as the most unsympathetic character in the novel. His relationship with Baba, Devi, Mayamma, and others was the same. He is insensitive towards all of them. Before, evaluating his relationship and behavior towards others, it is important to reflect on his childhood experience. In his childhood, he lived in the hostel, where he used to be envious of other children's mothers. As they use to bring different varieties of food for them but her mother was not present in her life. This is a common reaction for a child to be jealous of another kid's mother. Mahesh cannot be blamed for his behavior as he has grown without her mother's care. The reason for Mahesh's indifferent behavior is due to his complex and void relationship with his mother. He was not given an alternative for his mother's absence. Baba never talked his heart out in front of Mahesh. They accepted his mother's absence without any conversation. He never expressed more about his feelings regarding his mother. As a child, he felt the lack of warmth but he repressed it. Due to this, he is never able to provide warmth to anyone.

He never supports Devi in any way. In every way, he points out, Devi's inability to be a good wife. In reality, he is not a good husband to her. Although he supports all her physical needs but is never able to understand her emotional needs. For him, his work and position are everything. His life revolves around his self-esteem and self-respect only. He immerses himself in a life full of office work and parties of the same. He skipped the need for warmth in the Hierarchy of needs. The consequence of skipping this stage is faced immensely by Devi. He always admires Devi's mother and continuously compares the daughter with her mother. By making her guilty for her incapacity in household work, he says, "Did your mother need books to tell her how to be a wife? I've never met a woman more efficient than your mother" (Hariharan 70). He humiliates her through his words from time to time. He is half responsible for Devi's loneliness and mental condition.

Baba is Mahesh's father but is different in nature from him. He earned himself the status of a Sanskrit Professor as his walls are covered with his accomplishments. He is interested in the soul of music and the life of well-versed singers. He spends his days, reading and learning from his books. Devi gets so influenced by Baba that she wants to learn Sanskrit for her knowledge. He is an influential and wise personality in that house. In his early life, when his father died, he took responsibility for the household at a young age. He also got married to Parvatamma to start his married life. When his wife left, he did nothing to stop her. Maybe he was aware of her thought process. He accepted his wife's decision and continued with his life.

The only mistake done by Baba was not talking about the same with his son, Mahesh. Just like his wife, Baba also reflected very strong ideologies of life throughout the novel. After Devi's grandmother, it is he who made her understand the real meaning of life by reciting stories. He establishes himself above the need for self-esteem and self-respect by fulfilling them. We can position him on the topmost tier of the Hierarchy i.e. Self-

Actualisation. He adopts the art of music to reach the supreme power. He provides immense support to Devi in that house. During his departure, his only advice to Devi is that when we depend on others for our happiness, it leads us to misery. Our happiness should rely on ourselves and not others. He acquaints her with the importance of music. Even after his departure, Devi is not able to forget his strong presence in the house.

After evaluating all the characters, we can conclude that each character is different from the others because of their position in the Hierarchy of Needs. They behave and take decisions according to their needs. Throughout the novel, they are striving to complete their respective need. The novel revolves around the needs of the protagonist. Devi's needs interact in a complex manner with the needs of other characters.

### Conclusion

In the work of Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, we can evaluate that every character can be located on the Hierarchy of needs by Abraham Maslow. There are different and varied situations that shape the mind and needs of the character. Through her creative narrative, Hariharan has provided us with the reality of women in Indian society. With the utmost skill, she has pictured the plight of women in Indian society. Devi as the protagonist can be positioned on the need for warmth and belongingness. The reason behind her dissatisfaction is her relationship with her mother. She is not able to find love and warmth in her childhood. Due to this, she hopes that the unsatisfied need will be fulfilled by her partner, Mahesh. She opted for different techniques like spending time with Baba, Gopal, and Mayamma. But nothing provides her with the belongingness she lacked in her life. Her happiness was dependent on others. She was not independent and if her needs had been satisfied at an early age, her life could have been a different one. Along with Devi, we have noticed that every character could be positioned in the pyramid of needs. From Sita to Mayamma, Parvatamma to Baba, as well as Mahesh. Every human has to satisfy their basic needs to reach the

highest tier of the pyramid. There are characters like Sita, Parvatiamma, and Baba who have completed the first four-tier and aims at achieving the fifth one. But we also find a character like Mayamma who does not wish to move forward as she is satisfied at the second tier of security. It depends on the mental process of the character whether they want to achieve their needs or not. The techniques adopted by them hold noteworthy to mention as they reflect their desperation to achieve certain needs. If they were satisfied, they would have never taken a decision that changed the whole course of their life. Sometimes, it was not just the techniques but destiny that played its role in changing the course of life.

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