This extract from Githa Hariharan’s Thousand Faces of Night describes the uncomfortable situation an Indian woman, Devi, finds herself in during a social gathering. The narrator is third person limited and we are privy to the thoughts and emotions that Devi has as the situation unfolds. The tone of the passage is slightly sympathetic to (but at the same time highly interested in) Devi’s situation and also seems to mirror Devi’s feeling of being overwhelmed by all that is going on around her. The passage focuses on the growing isolation and alienation Devi experiences due to her racial difference in relation to the rest of the guests at the party. It is worthy to note that this alienation and isolation is not decidedly forced upon her by the guest at the party but is rather a result of the party guests inability to recognize their effect on Devi and Devi’s own insecurities. The use of auditory and visual imagery and brief instances of dialogue highlight the tension between cultures in the passage.

The first paragraph describes the situation Devi finds herself in. The indicative first clause “the room was full of people” immediately provides readers with a sense of claustrophobia and crowdedness. Because of this, we are able to share in the “apprehension” that the main character is feeling. The passage largely uses indicative verbs, which lends to the matter-of-fact detached tone of the passage. And the constant use of clauses and commas gives the passage a staccato feel, which reflects the racial tension in the room and almost mimics the constant rhythmic beating of Devi’s heart as she enters the party. The auditory imagery, “loud blaring music” and “high-pitched voices,” are noisy, discordant and unpleasing. This is in stark contrast to the silence suggested by Devi’s “sudden shyness”, which is emphasized further by its sibilance, which not only adds to the quiet and relaxing sound but also makes the phrase more harmonious. This juxtaposition of silence and noise builds to a “competition” of “voices” and reflects the racial tension we see in the story.

The narrator makes clear distinctions with race and constantly contrasts Devi with the other guests of the party. The party guests are all “young black men and women even a few children” while Devi is Indian. The nouns “men”, “women” and “children” are plural and make up a family and this only adds to the isolation the single Devi feels. This isolation is emphasized by the constant use of “they” and “them” This presents Devi not as part of the group but rather an outside observer, just like the narrator. The guests at the party speak with a “shorthand” which shows that there is even a tension in the language used in the passage. The woman that speaks is described in the second paragraph as “intense” and this is again a contrast to the meek and shy Devi. This contrast in personality makes readers further dissociate and distance Devi from the black Americans. The woman is said to have “snake-like braids” and this imagery is unmistakably a reference to medusa. This not only further distances Devi, but also evokes a sense of fear. This monstrous image of the woman allows us to easily determine the sarcastic animosity in her voice when she refers to the nurse as “polite and freezing cold”. The brief dialogue (or rather monologue) delivered by the woman brings up the theme of the inability to reconcile racial differences. The nurse, probably doing her job, did not understand that black women want to sleep with their baby. The woman suggests that all white americans (“you people” ) are unable to understand that for the black people “Black love is black wealth.” The “chorus of confirmation”, harmonious because of the alliteration and the auditory imagery of the chorus, shows that this thought is shared by the entire black community. Immediately there is another race divide in the passage: whites and blacks. The harmonious nature of the phrase mirrors the fact that within these racial divides, people of the same race are able to understand each other.

The next part of the fifth paragraph says that Devi had “less and less to say”. Since she already started the night silent and shy, we see this as a total breakdown of her speech. She is no longer an active participant in the social gathering, but rather a mere observer, “watching” events unfold just like us. “Snatches of conversation” “words that drifted” give us the image that language is literally floating away. Soon enough, Devi even loses the ability to observe the other guests as she loses the ability to understand what they are saying. Again a distinction is made in the language: Hariharan likens their language to a “foreign language” “recently learned” and this makes Devi’s isolation all the more prominent.

The sixth paragraph is composed of a single sentence and this showcases the importance of what it contains. The paragraph’s own isolation can also be a reflection of the isolation of Devi. There are two ironies in the paragraph. The first is that Devi is isolated in a crowded room and the second is that she is terrified of drawing attention to herself but all she wants to do is be noticed. Because of her race, she is isolated in the room. The black people, who feel almost annoyed at how white people are unable to understand their culture, a not sympathetic to Devi who probably feels the same way to the blacks as the blacks do to the whites. Ironically, Devi and the blacks share in their inability to easily mix with people of other races. Devi is afraid of bringing attention to herself for she fears that doing so will simply make her differences more evident and instead of simply being invisible, she may be socially shunned just like the nurse in the black woman’s story who was mocked for her inability to understand black culture. The image of the “smoke-filled room” evokes not only our visual sense but also our olfactory senses as well. Devi’s gift is described in great detail. It is interesting that parallels can be drawn between the description of the wall hanging and the description of the black woman earlier in the story. Both have elements of “blue”, both have animalistic elements (“peacock” and “snake-like”) and both have elements of being formed by hand (“braid” and “hand-printed”). This further links the two cultures and makes them similar. However, the black americans react to the gift in a racist manner. The woman’s voice is “edged with contempt” just like it was when speaking about the white nurse. Hariharan seems to be suggesting that racial differences are differences that will never be reconciled. Devi’s discomfort and alientation is emphasized by the fact that she even seemed distant from her own culture. She saw the image of Krishna as “grotesque” simply because of people from another race seeing it. Devi’s gift brought attention to her and as she feared, it resulted in her total alienation. The gift “set her apart from the others with… finality.”