

Female Identity In Githa Haiharan's *When Dreams Travel*

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the work of Indian Women Writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The factors contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women writers have observed no domestic space. The Indian women's perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. This research paper analyses how the Indian English fiction writer, Githa Hariharan uses the genre fiction as a medium to transmit the culture to learners exhibiting the Indian myths and shows how woman survive even in the odd situations of her life.

Key Words: Feminist, culture, survive

As the country progressing from tradition to modernity, the Indo- Anglian literature reveals a chain of women writers lining up with each other. In such a transitional period women have been playing an important role. Fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues and predicaments. The emergence of women novelists is a distinct and major feature. These women novelists, who have high educational and intellectual standards, have sharpened their observation of life and have imparted a psychological depth to their writings. So these writers have created a new canvas for the younger generation of Indian women novelists. These women writers have projected an insider's view of female psyche, inner aspiration and their peculiar responses to men and things.

The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. Indian writing in English is now gaining ground rapidly. In the realm of fiction, it has heralded a new era and has earned many laurels both at home and abroad. Indian women writers have started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. They are no longer puppets in the hands of man. They have shown their worth in the field of literature both qualitatively and quantitatively and are showing it even today without any hurdle. Today, the works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self - sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.

Among the contemporary Indian writers Githa Hariharan is considered to be one of the harder ones to pin down in terms of theme and setting and protagonist and so on. All her novels are varied but for a few common strands. One such thing is that all the titles of her novels are plural including the latest novel released in 2009 titled *Fugitive Histories*. Secondly the central theme of all her novels is the re-writing of given narratives be it myths, history or fables which is essentially a postmodern technique called 'revisionism'.

Githa Hariharan is one of the most important women writers in India. She was born in Coimbatore and grew up in Bombay and Manila. She got her B.A. degree in English from Bombay University. She also completed her M.A. in Communications from Fairfield University. At first, she has been working as an editor and later as a freelancer. Later, she settled in India and started her as a writer.

She had written many novels and short stories. Her novels deal with social and cultural problems with modernity. Since she was a native of India, all her novels deal with the society of India. She also uses myths in her novels. She is well aware of the multiple identities that are attributed to a writer in India as the English writer, the regional writer, the woman writer and even as the children's writer. As a writer she has been an astute observer of cultural issues. The novels of Githa Hariharan includes *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), *The Ghost of Vasu Master* (1994), *When Dreams Travel* (1999), *In Times of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009). Not only novels, her literary career proceeds through short stories like *The Art of Dying* (1993), *A Southern Harvest* (1993), and *Sorry Best Friend!* (2004) and *the Winning Team* (2004). She has also written newspaper articles and columns.

In her novel *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan says about the relationship of brother and sister. In this novel, brother ruled over sister. But at the end of the novel, sister gains victory over brother and proves her identity. Her novels reflect her own life. Even though, she also deals with 'Feminism' it is different from other feminist writers. Since Githa Hariharan is typical Indian, her feminism is also purely Indian. *When Dreams Travel (1991)* is a kind of feminist retelling of the Arabian Nights. The physical affinity between the two sisters brings into focus another facet of their troublesome relationship. Hariharan's novel thus becomes the quest for the power of feminine in a male bastion. Here the author attempts to write a metafiction through an elaborate intertext that is made foreground the feminist issue from a fresh perspective.

The novel is a retelling of the old story of Shahrzad and her sister Dunyazad. They are married to two brothers, the sultan Shaharyar and Shahzaman, both of whom were earlier cuckolded by their wives. To prevent this from happening again, the sultan marries a virgin each night, and then beheads her in the morning. This grisly practice continues until Shahrzad, the Wazir's daughter, manages to keep death at bay by telling him stories for a thousand and one nights. There are only two other characters who count: Dilshad, an insolvent and wily slave girl who betrays the Sultan by helping his son Umar to usurp the throne, and Satyasama, a freak from the sultan's Harem, whose body is covered with a sleek, lightweight fur. All these characters have a dream-like quality as though they exist in a trance. Early in the story Shahrzad dies mysteriously and much of the book concerns Dunyazad's efforts to find out how and why. The truth is revealed only in the last chapter's surprise ending. The deaths of Shahrzad and Shahzaman and the Wazir by no means preclude their frequent reappearances, either in dream sequences or in incidents from the past.

Githa Hariharan demonstrates her control of the fictional craft in the book's carefully planned structure. It is divided into two parts; the first unfolds the story of the four main characters: the second is a contrapuntal series of tales told by Dunyazad and Dilshad during their seven-day sojourn in the desert. In the major, players are participants in some gory and grotesque happenings. They include accounts of a limbless, headless monkey-woman who refuses to die: a pool full of dismembered female body parts, an endless manor built by two brothers, a woman who feeds the hungry with her breasts, and more in this vein. Some of these tales are drawn out to inordinate lengths. A few are puzzling, if not downright pointless. Finally the thought strikes us that if this was the kind of pointless, foolish stories Shahrzad told Shahryar night after night, her head might one day well have rolled like those of the virgin brides before her. Thus, Githa Hariharan depicts how women are oppressed in the Indian society as portrayed in the novel *When Dreams Travel*.

In the novel *When Dreams Travel*, Hariharan's Shahrzad is a magnificent fighter, who knows, she holds the destiny of many other women in her tongue.

At the same time Hariharan also successfully notes that Shahrzad's creative power of storytelling goes unacknowledged. For example, when Shahrzad (supposedly) dies, Shahryar praises her only for her chastity, that is to say, patriarchal value imposed exclusively on woman and not for her creative talent. The voiceless woman's voice is going to carve a place, and enjoy the glorious place in the history of creative writing permanently as Dilshad says to Dunyazad: "*You and I have a script of our own — a story or two waiting to be told, our text of gold to be written, every page remembering us to posterity*" (107).

In the first section of the novel, we realize that Shahrzad is no longer an archetypal victim fighting for her survival but a bold woman stimulated by the danger implicit in the situation. She

shifts from the position of a victim to that of puppeteer, the master-narrator who carefully plays and controls this scene. Against the passive listeners, king Shahryar and Shahzaman, she is one who is “*gifted with movement . . . talking for her life*” (Hariharan, 1999, p.5).

Hariharan’s narrative “off stage”, starts by questioning the meaning of “travelling” and “dreaming”, two words in the title *When Dreams Travel*. Shahryar wants to know where Shahrzad got the inspiration for all her amazing tales. This is her answer:

I don't have a sword, so it seems I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don't care to weep. But I can dream. (...) My dreams? . . . Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them. (20)

Shahrzad refrains from giving the sultan a straight forward answer because as she says bluntly, only those at risk should be entitled to understand the dreams that make up for the absence of a sword (a clear symbol, associated with power as violence). Then “to dream” in this novel, is a form of wisdom passed on between women. Although not allowed to travel physically, women always took to travel through imagination and in fact, a manual for survival. Shahrzad’s story itself shows that dreams and imagination can make women survive. Hariharan is quite clear about Shahrzad’s love for risk. Shahrzad’s love for danger makes of her a perfect figuration for liberated patterns of feminine identity because she represents, together with her self-assertive wit and savior behaviour. It is like locking a good jinni in a household bottle. Githa Hariharan shows the kind, helping and sympathetic nature of woman and how she uses her extraordinary power for the survival of others.

The above study shows that Githa Hariharan knows how to mould her writing through which she is all set to cause a silent revolution or change in the attitude of modern Indian women. Since she writes in English, her readership may have been limited to the upper and

upper middle class educated women. But her involvement in different groups, her conscious attempt to question the gender bias prove that she is a woman of substance and is a socially committed writer and a true citizen with awareness of her rights. Through her female characters in the novel she tries to show how woman search her identity in male dominated society. Woman faces all the problems in her life and even survives with her life and even survives with her inner strength and female bonding.

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