



Research Paper

## ‘Revisiting and Rewriting’: Post-colonial perspectives in Githa Hariharan's ‘When Dreams Travel’

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### ABSTRACT

The representation of women in traditional literary texts has always been a 'colonised' one. Many patriarchal texts lay claim to universalistic values of male hegemony and domination and thereby demote and disregard cultural, social, regional differences in experience and outlook preferring instead to judge and present all literature through a singular male 'universal' standard. Postcolonial critics have rejected this universalistic signification and have in effect argued to reclaim the position of people in general and women in particular who have been relegated to subsidiary, marginalised roles.

Githa Hariharan, one of the brightest, Indian post-colonial woman writers has successfully attempted to 'rewrite' the forgotten and often relegated histories of women and tried to foreground their roles in contrast to what has been shown to be insignificant and subsidiary. In her novel, 'When Dreams Travel' which is a rewriting of the famous, 'Arabian Nights', tries to illuminate the dark and forgotten spaces of the old story with a new perspective. She writes back to the original patriarchal text, projects the 'conditioning of marginality; 'Othering' and subverts the position of male dominance. Her novel exists in referentiality to the original text of the 'Arabian nights', along with significant echoes and departures. She crystallizes the elements of the legend to write her own novel, which is a continuous pursuit of truth about the making of a story, which is essentially, 'Her Story'.

**Key words:** Othering, Patriarchy, subversion, marginality.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the post-colonial theory resulted in the colonized societies criticism on the imperial project that has covered almost all the people the world over. Coinciding with the emergence of post-colonial theory, in the middle of the 20th century, was the evolving of feminism that played a pivotal role in questioning and reconstructing the ideologies of colonialism. It attacked vehemently the patriarchal hegemony which reigned supreme in the colonised nations. In many societies, women have been relegated to the position of the 'Other', and the 'Subaltern'.

The plight of women in general is akin to that of post-colonial people, as both these groups are powerless, exploited and have a subordinate position in society. Like Imperialism, Patriarchy is a phallogocentric, supreme ideology and dominates its subjects. While the Post colonialists react against colonialism in the political sense, the feminists reject colonialism of a sexual nature. As Kaur notes, "... it is imperative that both post-colonial and feminist discourses are articulated by resistance... both speak from their respective position within the hegemonic structure and language to subvert that language. but the most profound similarity is... both woman and post-colonial exist outside representation itself."(88). Moreover, the impact of colonialism on males and females is different, as females are led to 'double colonisation', whereby they are discriminated against not only as colonized people but also as women.

In the last century, feminist writing has cut across multiple and contradictory traditions presenting the most fundamental challenges in terms of subjectivity and experience. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1948) had initiated the process of analysing the social construction of gender and of distinguishing between sex

and gender. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) analysed the sex role and oppression of women under patriarchal social organisation. Feminists have tended to examine representations of women in patriarchal literature and challenge representations of women as 'Other' or as 'Lack'. Githa Hariharan, a bold and confident voice of the nineties, aptly fits this gamut of women writers and besides gender issues, her works encompass other major themes like post-colonialism, nationalism and history.

*When Dreams Travel* (1999), Hariharan's third novel drawn from the *Arabian Nights* delineates Shahrzad and her sister as the protagonists of this wonderfully crafted novel which brings to limelight the irrationality and brutality embedded in a patriarchal world. Githa Hariharan takes the well-known canonized text and writes her Novel *'When Dreams Travel'* with a new look. The Encyclopaedia Britannica classifies *Arabian Nights* or *Thousand and One Nights* as Islamic folk literature in which variegated materials like adventure, romances, fables, anecdotes etc are set within a frame story. Within a main frame-story, stories are told within stories.

The frame story is about Sultan Shahrzad of Shahabad and his brother Shahzaman, ruler of Samarkand. Once, Shahzaman decided to visit his brother and prepares for an elaborate travel. During a stop in the night, he secretly goes back to his palace and finds the infidelity of his wife with a slave. He kills them and resumes his journey to Shahabad. On reaching Shahabad, the king welcomes him but finds him worried and sorrowful. He invites his brother for a hunting trip, which he does not consent and stays back. In the palace garden, he finds his elder brother's wife involved in lecherous activities with palace slaves. He is horrified and tells his brother after he comes back. The Sultan is filled with agony, he proposes to renounce the world till he meets another person suffering from such disgrace. The two brothers during their journey come upon, a giant being betrayed by a woman continuously. This impacts the sultan so much that he devises a hideous plan of marrying a virgin every night and killing her in the morning. This new policy creates a panic in the kingdom, and soon no more candidates are left to be married to the king. However, the wazir's daughter, Shahrzad along with her sister devises a plan to stop the bloodshed. She arranges her father to marry her to the king. Every night she tells a story, leaving it incomplete and promising to do so the next night. This story telling continues for a thousand and one nights after which the sultan is cured of his obsession against women. Thereafter, Shahrzad's sister Dunyazad is married to the sultan's brother and the *Arabian Nights* ends with a promise that they live happily thereafter.

### **'Writing Back' and 'RE-Writing'**

Githa Hariharan retains the above frame of the story as she begins her novel *'When Dreams Travel'*, but she deals with the untold details of the legend and interrogates the many complacent assumptions of the original text. The Novel consists of two parts; part one is called 'Travellers' and part two is called 'Virgins, Martyrs and Others'. In the first chapter titled 'In the embrace of Darkness' the author retells the age-old beginning of *Arabian Nights*, but her story is different from the legend as indicated in the last line of the first chapter, "The story ends on-stage. Off-stage it has just begun" (Hariharan WDT 16).

In the second chapter, titled *'On the way to Paradise'*, Hariharan questions the apparent happiness of the protagonists after the 1001 nights. Peace is established to Shahabad, but does it mean anything to Shahrzad, who once saved herself and the entire kingdom risking their lives. Shahrzad is the Martyr, saviour queen, admired by people and the sultan, but she has become silent now, as her task of storytelling as well as redemption is over. When the Sultan questions, how could she tell her stories, she responds, "Only those locked up in dungeons and hovels and palaces can see and hear these dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them" (Hariharan WDT 20).

In chapter three, titled *'Knots in after life'*, the author takes us to a period of fifteen or so years after the 1001 nights, Dunyazad now a widow, makes a trip to Shahabad on hearing the news of death of her sister, Shahrzad. She feels utterly uncomfortable in the presence of her brother-in-law, Shahrzad. She befriends a young slave girl, Dilshad, who talks about Shahrzad and seems to possess the same genius inside her. She finds the sultan is not filled with any real remorse on the death of his queen, but pretends as he wishes to build a big Mausoleum in honour of her. Dunyazad, with help of Dilshad, helps the young prince, Umar to usurp the kingdom from his father. Prince Umar imprisons his father in the same mausoleum, he has built for his wife. Dunyazad, satisfied with the proceedings, prepares for her return to Samarkand along with Dilshad.

The second part of the Novel, *'Virgins, Martyrs and Others'* shows a shift from memory to storytelling by four people, Dunyazad, Dilshad and their Jinns - Shahrzad and Satyasama. Hariharan discards the ruthless rulers, oppressive, self-centred insensitive males, who couldn't acknowledge nor recognise the creative genius. Dunyazad and Dilshad tell their stories alternately not under the shadow of the sword, but with freedom and pleasure. Dunyazad's story talk about the personal sufferings of Shahrzad during the 1001 nights, where she had to give birth to 3 children, but yet return to duty of storytelling every night. Dilshad's stories are not about male fantasies and adventures, but about women, their talents and innovations, their creations and their punishments. She tells about Satyasama - the monkey poet, Rupavati's breasts, strange women Poison-skin, lonely voice, etc.

The novel exists in referentiality to the original text of the Arabian nights besides incorporating significant similarities and even more differences and thus essentializing the elements of the original text into making of a new text standing on its own.

## II. OTHERS AND SUBVERSION

Hariharan interrogates the patriarchal text on many fronts. In the original text, the reason for 1001 nights is attributed to the presence of lustful women. But, the brutal behaviour of the Sultans was never questioned. Women had no identity or creative space for themselves. Hariharan exposes the sadism and cynicism behind the androcentric myth about harems, "All kings are collectors. These valuable items are women of all shapes, colours and sizes" (Hariharan WDT 90). The author also interrogates the attitude of the Sultan towards the dead queen, who mourns her death in his magnificent mausoleum, not for her powerful creativity but for being pure and chaste. So, she is only gauged by the patriarchal values of chastity, imposed only on women.

Shahrazad has no room of her own. Every night she is plundered for the pleasure of the king. As a wife, she stands nowhere, just another addition to a list of wives. Even a consummate artist like her, is returned to petty domesticity troubles the author. But the author makes Shahrazad emerge as the epitome of Survival in a society. The Author also brings into focus other past events and people, especially the silenced women, of whom the original text does not speak at all. Raziya, Shahrazad and Duniyazad's mother is foregrounded by the author. Her despair and hopelessness is projected through Duniyazad's vision.

Hariharan also, makes Duniyazad to assert her identity as woman in WDT, whereas she was made to just wait upon her sister in the original text. The author makes Duniyazad to look back and resurrect the past only to subvert it through ironic retelling of the stories. Duniyazad and Dilshad, the silent figures of the Arabian nights, make their own Eriecture feminine in *When Dreams Travel* and hence succeed in asserting their identity as women through their magic-realistic tales. As Rama Kundu asserts, the author rewrites, "the macrocosmic metanarrative of the 1001 nights, from a postmodern context of feminism and metafiction." (Kundu 180)

## III. CONCLUSION:

The Legend concluded with a satisfying completeness, but Hariharan leaves the novel *When Dreams Travel*, open-ended with fears, forebodings and uncertainties. Githa Hariharan is uncertain about the place of women in today's world. The pervasive rise of fundamentalism may affect women the most, suggesting that her situation is a continuing reality through time.

She ends up evoking the struggle of earlier women to caution the future ones to remain conscious.

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