



STRATAGEM OF REVISING THE FEMININE TRAITS FROM TRADITIONALISM TO POSTMODERNISM: A RE-READING OF GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT* AND *WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.61.91>

ABSTRACT



Woman today is open minded, mentally and emotionally more stable than ever before. Women are striving to create a world which will be theirs without any inhibitions and restrictions, where they can break free from conventional traits. Hariharan projects the urges, dreams and desire of a woman, who has an aversion to be bounded and suffocated by her surroundings. All the characters in the novels are in the process of revealing their experiences and in fact reassuring themselves that they are not helpless but yet are doubly marginalised. The roles into which they ultimately fit themselves are stereotypes. Both the novels are well structured and well knit with a perfect connection between the traditional social conventions and the postmodern liberations. The female characters are shown as opening the windows from traditionalism and breaking the barriers to postmodernism. This paper aims at redefining the lives of women and finding the intersection between traditional and the modern.

Keywords: *Conventional, Redefining, Marginalized, Stereotypes, Traits.*



The place of women in society differs from culture to culture and from age to age. In the patriarchal society, history highlights male superiority and erases female experiences from authoritative documentation, considering female views to be fragmentary, irrelevant and invalid. The patriarchal system constructs 'woman' as a category, that the real one becomes non-existent, so that she is not born into this world; she rather is adapted into one. The stereotyped characteristics describing feminine woman include passive, fragile, dependent, non-competitive, non-aggressive, intuitive, receptive, afraid to take risks, emotionally labile, supportive, maternal, empathic, having low pain tolerance, unambitious, sensitive to inner feelings and to responses from other people. Woman, on the basis of their biology, especially in their role of reproducing and rearing children were dominated by men in a given family structure. In the contemporary world, women who passively accept traditional feminine roles and gain the approval and admiration of the male world are not depicted as successful. Only those who carve out a place for themselves from the male world are considered as successful. Githa Hariharan depicts the causes of women's exploitations and the physical and psychological tensions of women characters against the background of a rigid and traditional society.

The Western education or even the attraction for the Westerners does not convince them to marry a foreigner very easily. Hariharan illustrates this through Devi in *The Thousand Faces of Night* who rejects the proposal of her American friend Dan though she likes him and comes forward to marry a person of her mother's choice. Many parents want their sons to be educated in the West and want them to talk and dress like the English but prefer them to marry only Indian girls. Hariharan asserts that superstitious beliefs are not the monopoly of Indian culture alone. She exposes the Westerners who ridicule the East for their irrational beliefs, too foster such practices. She narrates the apartment in which Dan lives does not have a thirteenth floor as they believe that it is an unlucky number. She analyses and asserts that the superstitious beliefs that the Indians have cultivated have a cultural lineage. In the Indian conventional system, early childhood with the grandparents is of paramount importance which

makes the girl child to learn about her inborn qualities like sympathy, kindness, sacrifice, patience and self-discipline. Each story told by grandmother concerns an emotional and intellectual development of Devi. Her mythical stories are centered round marriage- the Nala-Damayanthi swayamvara, the story of Gandhari married to a blind rich prince with self-sacrifice, the story of the beautiful girl who married a snake who turned out to be handsome young man in the bridal bed, the story of Amba in marriage, the motherhood of Ganga and Shantanu. All these stories deconstruct the representation of the ideal woman with delicate feminine sensibility. These stories of womanhood indelibly imprint themselves in Devi's mind, "I lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine... I rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons heads" (41). Indian women have to change their attitudes after their marriage. When they are not able to change them they have to struggle; if they accept the institution of marriage they must accept the patriarchal framework of the society. Mayamma has to suffer in the hands of her husband and mother-in-law then in the hands of her son. Mayamma married when she was too young. She has to be responsible for her barren womb. To her husband she is a pleasure giving instrument. Her mother-in-law curses her for childlessness. Mayamma, unlike other women characters of *The Thousand Faces of Night* travels along with her fate; she is not able to control her life. Her days are filled with the domination of others. She is expected to be a good wife as well a dutiful daughter-in-law. Her real struggle lies in producing the family's heir, while she is accused for her barrenness her husband escaped from it.

If women want to prove themselves dutiful they have to follow the tradition of their ancestors though it is irrational. The following passage will substantiate the novelist's attitude: "The next time it was my breast. Cut the right one open, here, take this blade, Take the silver cup with the blood from your breast and bathe the lingam" (113). The notion of the duties of women must have affected Parvathyamma; her consciousness of individualism should be instrumental in her decision. Though Parvathyamma and her husband do not accuse each other, they are separated by their own decision. Her departure is



approved by her husband; it is not directly exposed and is implied. Even the way in which he selects his wife itself shows his passionless heart and conservative thoughts. He likes the name Parvathi more than her. The failure must have been caused by the absence of emotional elements in their life. Her absence does not affect Mahesh much; he takes side with his father rather than his mother. As a Brahmin he "believes what is heavier than the earth? A mother. What is higher than heaven? A Father" (86).

Female characters behave according to their ideologies, which are usually male dominative, and not with emotion. Sita's negation of Veena can be seen as the self refusal of passion. All men except Mahadevan in the novel dominate women; he seems inferior to Sita, presumably the reason behind it is, her refusal of Veena. She becomes a dutiful woman and seems to compel her husband to be perfect. Her husband must have been aware of the fact that her negation of Veena is the revelation of anger. Devi's marriage with Mahesh is something different from the marriages of other women, because Mahesh is selected as bridegroom with extra-carefulness. When Sita finds Mahesh as bridegroom she should have been aware of the selection father-in-law also; because Sita herself has the bitter experience with her father-in-law. As a result of it she could not calculate the nature of Mahesh; Sita has not taken that much effort for his selection as she has not suffered in the hands of her husband, Mahadevan. It is implied that the future of an Indian woman's married life is determined by the bridegroom and his family; if one of the family members is scornful she has to suffer.

Sita dedicates herself at the altar of marriage as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law, but the sacrifice comes to nothing because of her widowhood. By contrast, Devi, at first an "obedient puppet" of her mother, begins to think of "her mother's years of unstinting devotion to the family" (136) and understands her loneliness and deep, unrelenting pain, her life efficient but empty. This sympathetic gaze suggests that "the possibility of our newly-made friendship" (14), which Devi had expected just after she came back from the US, but which was betrayed, can be realised in a different way in the near future. She decides to meet Sita with

"the unflinching look" (139) which she has rehearsed beforehand and offers her love to her in order to make a new beginning. Sita also seemed to make a new beginning before she gave up her beloved veena to replace it with her daughter and to live as a domineering mother, a socially accepted form of ambition for women. According to Krishna Sarbadhikary, "Devi reunites with 'the maternal feminine', seeking to be cocooned in an even narrower space, not able to take any independent decision, content to be a survivor" (154). Hariharan suggests that in the last scene Devi and Sita create the space between them to stand face to face in order to empower each other. The help and support the women give each other through shared pain and humiliation, whether through the invisible ties between Devi and Parvatiamma or the reunion of Devi and Sita, create the basis for a battle against abuse, a warm refuge that empowers them to challenge the myth of a self-denying ideal wife in traditional Hindu culture.

Sita expects Devi to be a mother to attain ideal womanhood, and aims to pluck the buds off "a mutiny" off (105), countering her "dream of blood and ...women turning into men" (106). Devi has been oriented towards only one ideal of traditional womanhood by all those around her, though she knows the other stories of Mayamma and Parvatiama, and the stories of women whom her grandmother took care of, as well as the fables told by her. Hariharan makes Devi's struggles to challenge the traditional woman's role a matter of seeking "a story of my own" (137). There is a vibrant bond of joy and love between Devi and Annapurna, the two cousins and playmates. Annapurna, with plump, round breasts and glistening hair is 'a goddess' Devi secretly admires and for whom she has a rare passion. She is an active girl and teases Devi about her fear of climbing trees. One day, Devi tells her that "strangers sealed their new-found brotherhood with blood" (76) and Annapurna becomes eager to do this with Devi. They prick their little fingers with Amma's sewing needle and "joined wounds together" with pain and excitement (76). However, Annapurna suddenly leaves when Devi is away because her mother is jealous of "the unrestrained web of passionate intimacy Annapurna wove around" Devi.



(77). But she leaves an unforgettable memory of “mango-laden summer when bodies met in blood and sweat” (77).

Hariharan subtly shows the possibility of female subjectivity without reproducing the newly suppressed woman, ‘the other’. The subject position as a Brahmin wife allotted to Devi is replaced by her own story of womanhood, which in turn opens the way for other women to create their own narratives. Over centuries, Shahrzad, the narrator of *The 1001 Nights*, in *When Dreams Travel* had emerged to be the archetype for a storyteller, who could feed the curiosity of the listener and keep him in suspense under the charm of her magic. The extreme form of patriarchal oppression that was implied in the original tale, but was not criticized or questioned there, has been openly interrogated and exposed by Githa Hariharan. As Duniyazad is made to look back years later to the 1001 nights, “she sees that it was always Shahrzad who was its central magnetic figure” (105). The writer herself reconstructs the life of Shahrzad to redeem her so that her martyrdom does not go in vain under the shadow of the manmade testament to power and grandeur. It is a celebration of all womanhood and suggesting the power of feminine over male hegemony. The novel offers a subtle critique of the misogynist patriarchal values and sexual moralities. Shahrzad’s martyrdom springs not from her tales and craftsmanship but from virginal blood and her redeeming love for Shaharyar. Githa Hariharan critiques the notion of bloodshed associated with the martyrdom which acknowledges only male chivalry and the adventures of heroism and valor and presupposes the idea that “it is always a man who waits for them ... otherwise where is the terror and the excitement and the hard-won martyrdom?” (53). The male characters have swords and daggers, therefore they can rule and achieve immortality and martyrdom but the women too have their secret dreams, their unknown untrampled invincible territory of fantasy and imagination which rescues them from the tyrannies of the manmade world. When Shahryar enquires Shahrzad of her dreams, she replies: “Besides only those locked up in hovels and dungeons and palaces can see and hear those dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them” (20).

Being shocked by the unfaithfulness of their wives the king and his brother decide on a sadistic course which suits their lustful and ruthless ways. The husbands themselves take countless women as the wife or slave, according to their whim or pleasure. The novelist makes repeated emphasis on the cruelty, the male chauvinism that sometimes hides the real face behind the original tale, where sultan should marry a virgin every night, deflower her, then execute her next morning instead of allowing her a chance of disloyalty until the wazir’s daughter, the perpetual storyteller stops it through her skill of storytelling. Even after all charming stories, Shahrzad lives as an old forgotten woman, all alone, left to the care of slave girl’s in a corner of the old palace. Hariharan tries to depict the nature of the contemporary woman- in their prime days they work for the family or for the society, but in their old they remain inattentive and remained in the nook and corner of the house. It seems that women either invest in a communicative alternative of their own, like Satyasama, and are subsequently silences or alienated or they try to deconstruct the male language from the inside like Shahrzad. Shahrzad saves herself and the few remaining of Shahabad, by putting an end to the age of terror and allowing the country to find the necessary economic stability.

Dissatisfied with age old norms that emphasize woman’s passive role as a wife, Hariharan attempts to establish a new order. Her vision encompasses the whole history of woman’s role and edifies the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self. Through this works, she tries to establish a new paradigm of justice totally the opposite of the unjust social structures that prevailed in the Indian society.

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