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Gender, Identity and Politics: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* and *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Woman Writing in India

Long suppressed and tormented woman spirit in India which is now ready for challenge and struggle as influenced by 19th century feminism and women enlightenment has come up courageously with many vital questions about their existence, history, identity, participation, passion, creativity and talent and over all contribution to the growth and development of human life and culture, to the extension and nourishment of human life which have found strong expression in today's women writings. They are no longer hesitating to express their anguish against the deprivation, suppression and marginalization in the patriarchal society, mythical and traditional based society which is meant only for men, not for women. The silent phase of women, once worshipped as goddess but ironically controlled by patriarchal mechanism, referred to value based mythical women like Bihula and Sita, Gandhari and Amba, and the time of 'treat for tat' are gone; now they are ready for 'tit for tat' and serious rebellion. Many Indian woman writers are raising their pens; some are exploring their self, identity and dignity, some of them are confessing their love and passion, a few male and female writers are raising voice against gender bias society and resisting the gender discrimination and deprivation, and others are re-examining the established ideological and cultural texts of the past constructed by the patriarchal society in favour of the males and they also analyse the sadism and cynicism in that particular society. They have developed their own style and artistic technique. Moreover, they are successful in creating a new literary canon suitable to them as utmost stress was given on this particular point by the feminist critics or gynocritics in theoretical writings of Helene Cixous' "Laugh of Medusa", Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, (1977), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, (1949), Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's "Feminism and Literary Theory" etc. By 1970 Helene Cixous¹ formulated a philosophy of women's writing in her theoretical essay "The Laugh of Medusa" which was popularly known as *Écriture féminine* by which she implies the inscription of female body and women's lived experience in language and text and it has been influencing feminist writings since then. She propagates the democratic idea of writing of women by women for women. She announces in the essay that women should participate in creating new impregnable language and text to proclaim their position and representation in the human discourse and thus surpass the phallogocentric discourse. Cixous's this powerful essay awakens the incarcerated woman spirit and turns it into a rebellious one to act instantly.

Kamala Das, a confessional Indian English lyric poet, she is looked as the strongest feminine voice in India, a passionate woman with flesh and blood bearing ever with unsatisfied love, writes about her suppressed love and passion, her desire, hopes and frustration which lead her decomposition of self as she fails to get proper emotional response from the indifferent male folks in her patriarchal society, a high Brahmin society in India.

¹ Helene Cixous ([elen siksɥ]: born 5 June 1937) is a professor, French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician.

Her situation of life compels her to consider male body as the symbol of corruption and exploiter of female chastity. Her art and life, poetry and self, past and present, as we find well woven, are inevitably inseparable. Her poem “The Sunshine Cat” alleges her husband who is responsible for her restricted and abject life:

Her husband shut her
 In every morning; locked her in a room of books
 With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
 A yellow cat, to keep her company, but soon,
 Winter came and one day while looking her in, he
 Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
 Line, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when
 He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
 Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.
 (Das 243-244)

There is an echo of silent protest and rebellion against suppression and alienation, the restricted role in her life which is bluntly expressed in her remarkable poem “The Descendant”,

What I am able to give
 is only what your wife is qualified
 to give.
 We are all alike,
 We women,
 in our wrappings of hairless skin.
 (The Descendants 31)

Anita Desai² who is considered as one of the best Indian feminist writers, a poetic novelist, author of many widely read novels like *Fasting, Feasting; Cry, The Peacock; Bye-Bye, Blackbird; Voice in the City, Fire on the Mountain* etc. reflects serious issues of gender discrimination in Indian cultural context especially in domestic life, as girls and boys are discriminated by giving more importance to male child and depriving female child in many aspects that is obvious ranging from lower to upper class society of India. Allen Warren Friedman observes, “In the novels discussed here the protagonists are based with questions of existence and try to find answers to them in their own way, only to discover that the true question, the one alone worth asking, cannot and need not be answered, it need only asked over and over again, forever in new ways”. (Friedman 32) Fardinna Hussain³ also explores the idea of female exploitation and domination in Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* when she says, “Uma, the principal female character, is a victim of the Indian tradition of gender discrimination. Her parental home (and in her in-law’s house during her short stay) almost resembles a prison. She leaves this prison only on a few occasions with the approval of her parents even at the age of forty. She is treated more like a servant.” (Hussain 104) Mahesh Dattani’s⁴ famous Indian English play *Tara* is also advocating the issue of gender prejudice which is found to be deeply rooted in Indian cultural tradition. He considers it as an unseen issue in Indian society because it is not exposed to conscious level of life. In the play a

² Anita Desai (born 24 June 1937) is Indian English writer and Professor of Humanities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA.

³ Fardinna Hussain, Associate Professor, Dept. of English, GU, Assam, India.

⁴ Mahesh Dattani (born 7 August 1958) is a prominent Indian English playwright, director and actor. His major plays basically deal with the unseen but the most affected issues associated with the middle class families of in Indian society.

terrible injustice is being done to Tara, one of the Siamese twin babies, a boy and a girl. They were born with three legs of which the third leg that is originally belonged to the girl is denied to her during the operation and it is given to the boy as he is the inheritor of the family tradition and heir of the family property. She is a victim of the cruelties of the both nature and medical science, and also of tradition and heritage. Shashi Deshpande's⁵ *That Long Silence* is an outburst of silent anguish for the monotonous domesticity of female life imprisoned within the four walls of the male dominated house without any adventure and recreation, having no scope for showing their talent and skills, and completely far from knowledge and experiences of the outside world. As Saikat Majumdar says, "In two of her finest novels, *Roots and Shadows* (1982) and *That Long Silence* (1988), she positioned unforgettably etched, finely individualized women, Indu and Jaya respectively, within the matrix of the traditional, large extended family, though in very different locations with respect to individual achievement, personal freedom and power." (Majumdar 97) Bapsi Sidhwa, in her *Ice-Candy Man*, shows her readers the miserable condition of women, the plights, atrocities and injustice afflicted by the mobs or enemies of riots and wars during the India-Pakistan partition.

Subaltern Struggle in Hariharan's Fiction

Githa Hariharan⁶, the first lady in India to write her surname for her children after a long time challenge in Mumbai High Court and the author of many brilliant works like *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Fugitive Histories*, *In Times of Siege*, *When Dreams Travel*, *The Art of Dyeing*, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *Almost Home* is another strongest feminist writer in Indian English who is interrogating the situation of the female existence, underground history in search of self, desire, freedom or private space, identity and representation in patriarchal society, and moreover she is revealing her audacious resisting spirit to deconstruct the great mythical tradition of male chauvinism, ideological and cultural texts which were looked as the sources of moral and cultural ethics of Indian life. They are also read and enjoyed as masculine aesthetics for ethics but they are sucking and swallowing women as sharks and whales in the oceans; they are the forces to control and restrict female role in the whole sphere of life. In her writing, a noteworthy point, Hariharan is basically revisiting myths and history, tradition and heritage and she "focused on rediscovery" (Showalter xv) that one senses at one glance of her preludes. In other words Hariharan is exploring Indian cultural and ideological tradition which has been a major cause of female subalternity and thus she is representing the silent struggle of women for their self identity and dignity in the society. She has shown that myths and history of the ancient past are tightly woven with the present human life from which female individual self struggles to escape itself; it exiles in search of identity and dignity.

In her these two novels *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* she is retelling the ancient myths and fables, legend and stories of Arab and India which have been accepted since long without any question and doubt but now they are being interrogated and apprehended, posited at the vulnerable position. Devi, the main protagonist in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, a young Indian girl educated in America still deemed to be baby in Mayamma's eyes, was called back to India by her mother who got her married to Mahesh, an unsuitable and indifferent husband, reasonable stranger. She was trained to be an Indian woman and womanhood in reference to the most cited female figures of the past, Gandhari,

⁵ Shashi Deshpande (born in 1938, Karnataka, India), is an award-winning Indian English novelist and short story writer.

⁶ Githa Hariharan (born 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India) is one of the most eminent writer and Delhi based editor. Till now she has published four novels and two short story collections.

Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Damyanthi etc. to whom she often moved for resort. These damsels reappear through myths and story, fables and tales, music and memory, hymns and enchantments for the reconfiguration of socio-cultural system from generation to generation. They are still found to determine and control women's space and role, and finally their destiny too. Even though Devi was initially conscious about her "self" and "desire" later she was again drawn and sucked to the old order of things; and she easily accepted her situation when she lost her choice. However, she recalled the myths of Amba and Ganga and dared to escape from womanhood and domestic imprisonment departing Mahesh and Gopal. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is holding a crystal mirror of Indian ways of life, dreams and visions. It is telling secrete saga of many India women of different categories who have multiplicity of faces/identities and roles to play that are defined and conditioned by the cultural tradition, religion and myths. They are identified with multiple faces and roles as daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-laws and mother/motherhood/womanhood. Whether they are rich or poor, daughter or mother, they are leading a miserable life in one way or other. The novel depicts the miserable situation of a childless mother, a barren woman, Mayamma who was inhumanly treated by her mother-in-laws and husband. She tried her best to do every possible way to bear a child. Finally, it was successfully unsuccessful because after ten year long perseverance she got pregnant but the baby she gave birth was dead. It frustrated her husband's family. She was treated as an outcaste and finally she was driven away from her husband's house. She spent rest of her life as a servant and caretaker of Mahesh's house. Indian concept and vision of marriage are very shallow as they are merely guided by the atavistic and physical desire but not with genuine love and friendship even though there are some exceptions. Consequently a childless wife or woman is not treated well, she does not have any respect and position in Indian society. There are thousands of Indian women like Mayamma who are treated as outcaste for their barrenness. They lead a miserable life. Bharbatimma, Mahesh's vanished mother was not properly cared by her husband, Sita, Devi's grandmother was also neglected who could not continue with her music, playing *veena* which was her only thing of pleasure in life. Devi was also neglected by her husband. Mahesh was a business man. He travelled for months for his business. He came once or twice in a month. He did not understand his wife's love and passion. Normally he came home with friends, and drank, played and enjoyed with them. He did not, even at home, care her at all. If she sometimes asked him why he had married her she had to hear a shocking and callous answer, "Whatever people get married for" (Hariharan 54). To Mahesh also a marriage was necessary only to maintain generation and his domestic affairs, nothing more than that. He says, "Indians are not obsessed with love" (Hariharan 55).

Githa Hariharan, a challenging woman writer in English, in her *When Dreams Travel*, is writing back to the world wide popular legendary tale, frame story, *Arabian Nights* or *One Thousand and One Nights* who has changed the narrative pattern, motif, outlook, vision and politics of the source text seeking for re-exploration of the off-scene and marginalized background and characters, especially female characters. The hypertext is concerned with new vision and politics which have been given novel pattern and direction to it for its extensive movement and examination. She has expressed a great disappointment with the *Arabian Entertainment*. Her fiction *When Dreams Travel* consists of two parts; the first chapter of the part I is a parody of the original text telling the visible scene of the frame tale and the rest of the novel is metafiction as it explores the marginalized background and characters, tells untold stories and makes criticism of the prejudiced text, *Arabian Nights* that is about the one thousand and one nights entertainment by Shahryar, Arabian emperor, a pharaoh and his brother, Shahzaman and on the other hand it is about the one thousand and one nights' struggle by two poor sisters, Shahrzada and Duniazad, wonderful story tellers,

who risked their lives to save the lives of other women in the kingdom, who were indeed real heroes without history. Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* has been a strong feminist critique of the traditional concept of women as mere lustful and traitor or cuckolds, child bearing machine, an object of man's desire, an object of use and throw, established by *Arabian Nights*, that has led patriarchal society to disrespect and devalue them in the society. Myth making politics of patriarchal society for constructing self-centred ideologies has been observed here as *One Thousand and One Nights* tells only about the men's adventures and history, their hopes and frustration and thus it hides half of the truth showing two strong figures of heroines as mere shadows or inactive figures behind the screen of the scene. To challenge this established ideological text Hariharan uses her innovative, visionary and imaginary power to give a new vibrant life, hopes and aspiration to the marginalized female characters and rejuvenate their talent and creativity. As Mahua Ghosh observes, "So, she takes it upon herself to challenge and reject the androcentric imagination by inventing a story about the later events and experiences in the life of the story teller." (Ghosh 113) In her parody Shahryar and Shahzaman who simply played the role of commander as fortune favoured them since after their birth were feminized, ornamented and shown as merely silent figures, inactive, were idly sitting and listening the adventurous tales told by the two bold sisters night after night. Both of them are shown as bodyguards holding swords: the former a "mere ornament... a grand showy thing of gem-encrusted gold" while the latter holds another "plaything in his hand, an ancient, blood-dripping sword" (Hariharan 5). The two sisters, as shown by Hariharan, were adventurous, more ambitious and talented, more proactive and skillful in their thought and action than the two royal brothers. Shahrzad purified the lusty and blood thirsty mind of the sultan, changed his cruel and brutal mind and she also finally taught him a moral lesson that service of a mother, queen, was also equally important along with a father, king, to run a palace; service of women was/is essential for the progress of human society. Hariharan is very critical about the false and monumentalized sympathy of Shahryar on the purity and chastity of Shahrzad but not for her talent and creativity. He simply mourned for her chastity but not for her creativity, action and contribution. So, she (novelist) is raising question, if it is enough simply to build monument to immortalize the love and chastity of a *begam*, queen neglecting her creative action for the palace and kingdom. There arises question of identity and existence in human history. Shahrzad whether she was living in the monument after her name, symbol of her tragic history, considered as unashamed paean to the human heritage without any heavenly justice, was being a matter of question and doubt which Duniyazad posed in the following lines:

Shahrzad disappeared. Shahryar does not know if she lives, but if she is dead, he hopes it was swift and painless, this is his sincere wish. Otherwise, he is in the tomb meant for her, he does not think of her for days on end. Sometimes, when he tries to reconstruct her face, it is a complex, composite picture that looks at him gravely. He can place a feature two as belonging his wife, or her sister, or a resourceful slave girl of recent years, or some strange and hairy female beast languishing in his harem. He pushes this unrealistic image away and turns to his design board. But the tussle between the harem leaking out its safe walls, and the king's secure chamber, is not yet over. This is clear on the day Shahryar dies." (Hariharan 159-160)

Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* excavates the relics; off-scene backgrounds, hidden experiences, unseen atrocities and injustice, untold stories of danger and fear, struggle and action, unexposed talent and creativity of women in the legendary frame story *Arabian Nights* through a dominant female character, Duniyazad, Shahrzad's younger sister and it is exploring the marginalized female characters of the original text. In the dramatic scenes of the long story telling session for one thousand and one nights the audience is shown only four

figures, Shahryar sleeping in the comfortable bed and listening, Shahrzad sitting on the other side and telling tales, Duniyazad waiting behind the screen for supporting her sister and pouring intelligent questions to continue another story for the next fatal night, and indignant Shahzaman waiting for his brother's command. Finally it ends with emperor's satisfaction and happy marriages of two couples, Shahryar and Shahrzada, Shahzaman and Duniyazad. But it is an incomplete episode, partial narration and representation because many things happened inside the scene. It reminds us about the earlier thousand of horrible scenes of one night melodramatic episode; one night married life of a bride, rape and beheading of new brides at dawn. Then there came Shahrzad's dreaded struggle with death and martyrdom, with deadly sword ranging behind her neck, patriarchal sexuality and cruelty, pain of bearing children and giving births during those fatal days of one thousand and one nights. She could not even enjoy the pleasure of nourishing children as they were handed over to the nurses in another corner of the palace. This was the atrocities and injustice done by the orthodox and faithless, misogynist emperor, Shaharyar. The meta-text is criticizing the celebration of this misogynist ideological text by the Middle East for its moral and aesthetics that produces women as lustful and incredulous beings.

Honesty and morality of Shahryar are also interrogated how the blood thirsty cruel and sexist man could be so easily turned to an ordinary and kind hearted man to love and trust women. Sudden death of Shahrzad is also a doubtful event. In the deconstructed version all silent and voiceless figures are brought to focus and are attached with new life and energy, hopes and aspiration to speak about their suppressed feelings and emotions. Sahiba, maid nurse, and Dilshad, slave lover of Duniyazad (lesbian lovers) told their secret stories and Duniyazad visualized her mother's (Razia) voiceless situation in allowing her daughters to marry the heartless emperors. Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* is no longer male centered *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* but it is now women concerned novel as it deals with female experiences, dreams, hopes, desire and frustration, women adventures and heroism as consequences of the re-exploration of the gone history that is referred to in the source text. Chitra Sankaran observes,

After the frame story, where the Arab girl narrator's position as the potential victim of a power-crazed, woman-hating, sultan has been briefly elucidated, the narrative becomes woman-centred. Shahrazad's victimhood is replaced by a version in two parts, where two women, Duniyazad, Shahrzad's sister and Dilshad, a slave girl in Sharyar's palace, who are lesbian lovers, tell each other stories, one tale answering the other's, for seven days and seven nights. Duniyazad who was only the secondary, marginalized character in *One Thousand and One Nights* becomes a central character here. (Sankaran, 5)

What has been clearly observed in the hypertext is that the selection of a text like *Arabian Nights* which is primarily concerned with widely migrated tales, myths, legends and anecdotes that attach or validate the Indian and Middle East moral and cultural values, patriarchal values of women chastity and purity, shows the politics of male chauvinism. Hariharan has exerted deconstructive politics and postmodern intertextuality to re-examine the established text and to refocus on the rediscovery, put epistemological questions and reproduce a metafiction, a hypertext, for recasting the range of ideological issues and a new socio-cultural patterning. It is objectively done by the author keeping the motif of rectification and modification of the patriarchal patterning of ideologies and moral ethics that has been a strong mechanism for exploitation, marginalization and domination of women prevailing in the society from generation after generation. The study shows that *When Dreams Travel* is a feminized text, women centred novel as it is written in feminist

perspective by changing the technique of characterisation, colours of characters, atmosphere and purpose of the text. Here is a tendency to break away from the patriarchal tradition and norms; a demand for radical change. The whole hypotext is a dialectic that demands the paradigm shift of human life. Telescopic vision and images of the text metaphorically suggest re-exploration leading to rediscovery of past events and experiences of women's life, their plights and agonies; and it is more of reanalysis of the conventional beliefs, traditional concepts and ethical ideologies of patriarchal society so that it can help in reformulation of concept and attitude of man and woman for dialogic communication and revaluation of woman's life and action. It is throwing a light on the need of relooking to the socio-cultural structure which invokes reconsideration and redefinition of myths, legends, history, religion, value, ethics and morality for reconfiguration of the social system. Moreover, Hariharan is accusing ancient historiography for its ethical violence by subsiding about the woman patriotism and heroism. She has given a grim warning about the future danger of women's position and identity because she is still apprehensive in her writings. However, her *When Dreams Travel* has been a strong critique of the androcentric historiography which did severe injustice to the subaltern history of women, a large subordinate group, by showing apathy to their talent, creativity and heroic action. And it is a citable example of successful reconstruction of the unrecognized history of the past through the artistic imagination which can revive the historical dialectic, an intellectual dialogue, and it can also help in forming community of opinions that is essential for reconciliation and better realization. They are brought back, reinterpreted, analyzed, questioned and changed.

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