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Irony as a Mode of Expression in Githa Hariharan's Fiction

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Abstract:

The present article is a humble effort to critically examine as to how Githa Hariharan, not satisfied with woman's passive role, expresses her strong protest, and deconstructs the age-old myths and beliefs employing 'irony' as a robust mode of expression in her fiction. She thus strives to subvert and erode the archetype myths and the ideology propagated by the mechanisms like patriarchy. She critically examines, dissects and questions the traditional beliefs, and is concerned seriously with the fate of a woman and her state of isolation in Indian socio-political scenario. Her legitimate displeasure is thus to strive and urge strongly not only for the alternative modes of survival and existence of a woman but also to carve a separate individuality and identity. The passive acceptance of patriarchal agenda by a woman is thus treated by Githa Hariharan with her sharp surgical weapons in the garb of pithy and ironical statements that probe deep throughout her fictional craft.

Keywords: Identity, survival, protest, wisdom, myth, satire, irony, sarcasm, archetype, ideology, patriarchy, destiny, ethos, stereotype, subvert, chaste, culture.

Every creative artist employs a distinct and effective mode of expression in order to articulate and convey his/her thoughts. Such a mode of expression is thus individual's choice depending upon the writer's perspective, the subject matter and the expertise s/he gains through the course of his/her artistic maturity. As far as the Indian writing in English goes, the writers of multifaceted potential and repute have performed wonderfully achieving national and international acclaim. Be it a question of woman's identity, the concern for underprivileged and downtrodden ones, or deconstructing the unjust myths – these writers have left no stone unturned. The identity and survival of a woman in Indian context had been a major theme in the works of many a writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Githa Mehta, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Needless to say, the unequal status of women in Indian society is fairly dealt with in Sehgal's works; the long suppressed silence of women find its due voice in the works of Shashi Deshpande, and the psychological terrains of lonely women are duly explored by Anita Desai. Besides, the business of deconstructing the existing myths has been prevailed over by the novelists like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Githa Mehta in their works (of international repute) like *Midnight's Children*, *The Shadow Line* and *River Sutra* respectively. We can safely add the name of another Githa to this short list who wonderfully deconstructs the myths carrying age old wisdom; and the modes she employs for the very purpose are undoubtedly, what Urmila

Varma asserts, "the satire, irony and sarcasm" (Varma 100). Irony thus hails as a robust tool in Hariharan's arsenal by virtue of which she critically "examines, dissects and questions (these) age-old norms" (Ibid).

Hariharan is seriously concerned with the fate of a woman and her state of isolation in Indian socio-political scenario. She vents her serious displeasure and urgent need not only to look for the alternative modes of survival and existence but also to carve a separate individuality and identity. The passive acceptance of patriarchal agenda by a woman is treated by Githa Hariharan with her sharp surgical weapons in the garb of pithy and ironical statements throughout. When Mayamma screamed on losing her baby conceived after ten years of longing and penance the ironical strokes on what the society perceives all about a woman find an outlet through the mouth of the village doctor who rebukes on her screams: "A woman must learn to bear some pain...What can I do about the sins of your previous birth." (Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night* vii) As the novel proceeds we learn through grandmother's mythical stories that Gandhari, Dhritrashtra's wife, was not told of her would-be husband's blindness for "a woman meets her fate alone" (28), and Amba's father did not stop Bhishma from kidnapping his daughter for "the woman fights her battle alone". (36) Mythologically a woman's fate can be altered if gods are displeased for they make sure you don't bear a child. And what a pity that for such displeasure neither the man nor the gods are responsible; it is the woman alone as highlighted amply by the grandmother: "Devi, remember this: it's never their fault. It's always ours (women's)." (33) In another story a pearl-like maiden is made to marry a snake without her consent, and when the young bride comes to know all about it, she is compelled to accept her destiny since in Indian socio-cultural scenario "a girl is given only once in marriage." (Ibid) One is shocked to see the stoic acceptance of such unjust ethos when the girl embraces her fate: "Stop this mockery of lamenting and wailing. Let me go to my waiting husband." (Ibid) And what a mockery that she liked this husband, the snake, just "because she married him." (34) The sadistic and ironic part about woman's fate is that not only she is given once in a marriage but also when she marries her heart goes to him (her husband) and "you never get it back; you can't do anything about it" (37); and even over to that "a woman without husband has no home."(38)

Githa Hariharan erodes the very premise of stereotyped ideas about the role of a woman contained in the proverbs, sayings and customs expressed by Devi's father-in-law:

"The path a woman must walk to reach heaven is a clear, well-lit one. The woman has no independent sacrifice to perform, no vow, no fasting; by serving her husband, she is honoured in heaven." (55)

The Indian socio-ethos that women need neither an identity of her own nor separate woes to attain heaven but a mere devotion to her lord (the husband) meet its due storming ironic blow in Hariharan through Baba's discourse:

“The house wife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word and body, she who does not transgress her lord, attains heaven even as her lord does.” (70-71)

Baba further gives a graphic picture of virtuous woman that comes out to be a typical example of orthodox ethos:

“A virtuous wife is so devoted to her husband that she dies before him, a sumangali, her forehead unwidowed and whole with vermilion, her arms and neck still ornamented with bangles and gold chains.”(66-67)

The age-old sayings stay meaningless to Hariharan and become target of her satiric-ironic mode; these religious sayings are practically nothing more than a hoax and sham to the protagonist Devi who, with time, finds herself a mere puppet in her husband’s hands:

“Fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law should honour brides, if they desire welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods delight; where they are not honoured, there all acts become fruitless.” (65)

Needless to say Devi is not at all convinced by these guiding principles and ideologies. These words of wisdom, to her, are meaningless and irrelevant for ideologies stand miles away from the actual world experienced. The ironic tone, for instance, tends to be quite sarcastic when Devi comes to terms with Baba’s (her father’s in-law) philosophical view:

“Non-violence, truthfulness, honesty, purity, control of the senses thus, in brief is the dharma of all the four castes. You see it takes the wife’s flame of dharma, to light within a man, the divine lamp that is rusting with neglect.”(66)

If the idealistic version of woman is portrayed by Hariharan as nothing more than a sham, she doesn’t spare the man from her deep probing and penetrating tools either. Employing ‘hyperbole’ he is made ludicrous:

“It is useful to remember that a husband is a man. So is a father. He trembles if you climb a tree, a foolish, unaided girl. He holds you back journeys, mistrustful of devils, snakes, young boy’s legs, books, anything at all...he marks you with his name... strips your breasts of those whorish veils of the goddess, their thousand disguises. He holds her teeth apart in mock kindness and sucks like hungry serpent coiled around your upright nipple.” (92)

Well does Rama Kundu points out that in Hariharan’s third novel *When Dreams Travel* “the ironic style dominates the narration”. She further observes that “the author’s ironic style, the parodic tone, together with the apparent hilarity of mood, consistently subvert the novel’s own referential illusion” (Kundu 186); and such a style is occasionally overpowered by a surging sadness as could be aptly seen in Hariharan’s description of the Sultan:

“All his subjects love him, such as the love of subject is. So, two kings mounted on their thoroughbred horses...with the advantage of height, could dispense it (justice) as they chose.” (90)

Having dispensed the justice as the sultan (Shahryar) chose and having killed thousands of virgins, he is now constructing a tomb, a rare monument of love; and what a pity that such a “sultan of justice, later the sultan of manly and bloody honour, is now the sultan of love... love remembered in tranquility of grief.” (60) Nevertheless this sultan is the “God’s gift to innocent and not-so-innocent brides.” (259) And it is not for nothing that when the queen Shahrzad suddenly took ill, only Shah and few trusted slaves – claim to have been there; the rest saw the sealed coffin; perhaps he could not bear to “see, or display, the beloved face dead.” (81)

The irony in Hariharan’s fiction is often punched with satiric gleam so as to amuse: “He is sultan, and sultans, we know, must marry now and then.” (95) With pungent irony she brings out the obscenity, the cruelty, the unfairness and the abject male chauvinism that comfortably hides its face behind façade of the original tale:

“The citizens of Shahabad need not hang their heads in shame – their king does not lag behind his counterparts elsewhere in the civilized world. There is a prize collection of slave girls, in Shahryar’s palace too. Talking women, dreaming women, mute women...” (90)

Rama Kundu observes that “with pungent irony Hariharan exposes the sadism and cynicism behind the andocentric myth about harems.” (Kundu 187) The kings are collectors and the valuable items they collect are the women of all sizes, colours and shapes; and having callously dumped the collection behind the stone wall of the palace they would propagate the myth – “The harem breeds hungry women, a race of cuckolding subjects” (78). These collectors of women, having satisfied their lust, intend to celebrate chastity of a woman:

“I will show the world how much a man can love a woman. I am building a memorial that will do justice to my love for Shahrzad. And it must do more – it must reach generations to come what a chaste woman is?” (59)

Making ironical use of the very premise of the male chauvinism and cruelty Hariharan brings out that the husbands themselves could take countless women – wife or slave – according to their whims or pleasure, but that of course was ‘a right taken for granted’, not to be questioned. As has already been observed, the irony in Hariharan’s fiction tends to satirize the shallow pride and whims of a man: “though the wazir is a distant father, he knows his household well enough to realize that there are two virgins who can save him and the city.” (255) The satiric-ironic vein is apt when Hariharan speaks of Shahryar’s wazir who is “equally deft with words and silence”, at present he, however “chooses the latter.” (257) His shrewdness is brought out with due clarity by the novelist when, with his lying words, he pretends to persuade one daughter and dissuade the other:

“he speaks in a gentle voice that sits strongly in his throat, he opts for the safe, lying words. You are too young. I can’t spare you- you must see that your mother and I can’t lose you yet.” (256)

In a satiric-ironic expression Hariharan brings out the un-reasonability and injustice behind the forced labour, thereby ensuring class-awareness. That a king succumbed by his whims and caprice could even be more dangerous than a powerless shepherd, is brought out vividly by the novelist:

“An army has invaded the city at the sultan’s orders: an army of stonecutters, inlay-workers, calligraphers, masons, supervisors. Slaves and free men who cannot pay the new tomb tax pull carts loaded with bricks, stone and slabs of marble. Their bent backs travel to and from the palace.” (60)

Hariharan indicates the unlimited and the unjust power of a sultan whose “power are legion, and he can light up the palace, the city, turn night into day; banish sleep and secrecy.” (102) With pungent irony she explains how this “all-powerful sultan of Shahabad, is left behind (captivated) in the (very) tomb (he constructed) for Shahrzad”(102) ; and ironically he is now “a prisoner of his memories.” (Ibid) The cruel despot finally meets the poetic justice as his captivation is not only by none other than his own son but could also be termed as a befitting “retirement gift to a father’s starving soul (by his loving son)” (153) This perhaps is not all as Hariharan’s ironic-satiric strokes are yet to hammer hard; she writes:

“The sultan’s prison is, after all, a cushioned one, nothing like the dungeon in which his own prisoners were tortured with hunger, thirst and irons.” (153)

The fate of sultan who “not only collected women, but gems, arches, kingdoms, calligraphers, stallions, automatons, wise words and many other curiosities” (153) is thus brought out with due clarity and irony.

The instances of irony in Hariharan’s fiction are duly employed to erase the age old male-pride and his attitude to dominate the woman; his unjust demand for a ‘woman alone’ to remain chaste was apt to become Hariharan’s target. As the story goes, each time after having satisfied his lust, jinni - the supernatural master of the girl - converts her into a grain of wheat and hides her into his stomach lest she should deceive her; and unaware of the fact that the girl has deceived him by her adultery a hundred times and always in his presence he “gazes at her with satisfaction” (14)

Later in the book we come across the phrase “the thousand and one nights are done” (21) that proves to be completely ironical since it provokes the reader to look for those nights and many others in addition too. Also the description of the “the legendary city (Shahabad), showpiece of wealth and high culture” (30) is ironic in itself, since this is the place where blood-thirsty Shahryar dwells-in and where, once upon a time, a thousand innocent virgins were sacrificed to his unjust resentment. The description of the very “city that is in the clutches of a dream” (29)

and the time of such a state – “the mid-afternoon” (29) - proves again ironic for dreams are often seen at night. Interestingly, the irony, at times, comes whole rounded in the garb of a paradox or an oxymoron: “People gather; ordinary men and women too, to see a good death and be enlightened.” (50) One is taken aback coming across such juxtaposition of words with completely opposite sense (the author again resorts to employ oxymoron); and is compelled to chagrin as to how even the death could be an “auspicious (one), accompanied by the recitation of holy, blessed chants.” (Ibid) Such an employment of irony in the garb of oxymoron could be aptly seen in the statements like “...only complete silence would ensure her the right to be a free citizen of eternal city” (Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel* 148), and “Mayamma never saw her husband again, but she got him back all right...” (Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night* 81) A fine example of irony tending to be sarcasm could be seen when Dunyazad, with due grievances in her heart about Shahryar, conveys her regard for him through Dilshad: “And oh - convey my deepest respects and heartfelt condolences to the sultan” (Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel* 44); and again when she expresses peoples' feelings about Shahryar when he is so-called grief stricken:

“...the people after all love their redeemed sultan now more than ever in his grey season of grief.” (81)

No doubt Githa Hariharan leaves no stone unturned in legitimizing her robust protest and eroding the age old wisdom contained in certain stories and myths employing ‘irony’ as a mode of expression in her fiction. The archetype myths and the ideologies like the patriarchy, are thus examined, dissected and deconstructed in the guise of this powerful tool; her serious displeasure thus finds its due endorsement against the illegitimate claims by such institutions.

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