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## “Afterlife” to *The Arabian Nights*: A Study on Githa Hariharan’s *When Dreams Travel*

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### **Abstract:**

Stories in *The Arabian Nights* have been fascinating to people all over the world. The frame narrative in *The Arabian Nights* gets afterlife in Githa Hariharan’s novel *When Dreams Travel* published in 1999. Githa Hariharan is a contemporary novelist and short story writer who rose to fame with the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*.

This paper examines the ways in which the novel *When Dreams Travel* reworks the frame narrative in *The Arabian Nights*. It examines how the novel interrogates the themes of love, power and sexuality in the hypotext *The Arabian Nights* by providing a subversive reading to its frame narrative and its embedded stories. The paper seeks attention to its mode of narration in metafictional fashion to show how the novel invites the readers to critically examine the happy ending of the frame narrative. Also, the paper examines the silent and marginalized voices in the novel and show how these voices provide a critique to the frame narrative in the hypotext.

**Keywords:** frame narrative, hypotext, metafiction, subversive.

Githa Hariharan problematizes and critiques the discourse of *The Arabian Nights* in *When Dreams Travel*. It explores the themes of love, power and sexuality through myriad stories woven into the narrative. She employs the story within the story format like that of in *The Arabian Nights*. She says:

The challenge was to take parts of the framework story as a starting point without losing my way in the extravagance of design or language you find in *The Arabian Nights*. I wanted my novel to acknowledge *The Arabian Nights* as an ancestor, not as a model. All the stories in *When Dreams Travel* are my inventions, and they have very real links with contemporary

lives. Finally, what I wanted to do was create Modern myths with *The Arabian Nights* as my point of departure. (qtd. In Shubhshree 380)

The novelist drew material from the hypotext to imaginatively create modern myths that will examine the depiction of stereotypes.

*When Dreams Travel* is based on the frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights*, the novel’s hypotext. *The Arabian Nights* is a collection of stories of uncertain date and authorship. Western scholars of the 20th century agree that it is a composite work consisting of popular stories originally transmitted orally and developed during several centuries, with material added somewhat haphazardly at different periods and places. In *The Arabian Nights*, Shahryar, the sultan of an Arabian Kingdom, having been cheated by his unfaithful wife and having been encountered by an unfaithful jinni, conclude that all women are unchaste. Loathing all womankind, he then embarks on a ruthless mission of marrying a virgin each day, satisfying his lust and then killing her before daybreak. Scheherazade, the daughter of the wazir, marries the sultan, and defers her death and thereby the death of many virgins, by engaging the sultan with her stories night after night for a thousand and one nights. The stories keep the sultan completely involved so that he forgets his new wife’s execution; they continue to be narrated for thousand and one nights till the sultan is convinced that all women are not unchaste. This is the frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights*, within which are embedded the stories of Scheherazade, and it ends with the marriage of Scheherazade and Shahryar and the restoration of peace in the kingdom. With the usual endnote of fairy tales “and they lived happily ever after” the curtain is drawn.

*When Dreams Travel* begins with the presentation of two scenes in *The Arabian Nights* together—Shahzaman sitting at the entrance to the palace dungeons, with a sword dripping blood, and Shahrzad narrating stories to Shahryar in the presence of her silent accomplice, her sister Dunyazad. Shahrzad narrates stories when the royal sword hangs on her head, to save her life and thereby the lives of many innocent virgins. The story behind the scenes is then recounted.

The brothers Shahryar and Shahzaman discover that they have been cheated by their wives. They travel far and wide to find a person who is more shamed than them. They meet a girl cheating her jinni husband when he is asleep. Her liaisons with many men, including Shahryar and Shahzaman, convince the brothers that all women are unchaste and unfaithful. Both brothers then return to their kingdom and kill their respective wives. Dissatisfied with this revenge, Shahryar marries a virgin each day and kills her the next day. Shahrzad, the wise elder daughter of the Wazir,

then marries him and keeps the sultan enthralled night after night for thousand and one nights with her stories and thus postpones her death and saves the lives of many other virgins. The novel is set against the background of this story, with the memory of the thousand and one nights—Shahryar’s cruelty and Shahrzad’s storytelling to postpone death that is looming large throughout.

The rest of the novel is the “afterlife” of this frame tale. Hariharan’s tale begins at the point where *The Arabian Nights* ends: “The story ends on-stage. Off-stage it has just begun” ... (16). The frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights* is retained, but with important differences. It begins at the point where the hypotext concluded. Hearing of the sudden death of her sister Shahrzad, Dunyazad returns to Shahabad, Shahryar’s kingdom, twenty years after her marriage to Shahzaman, to unearth the truth behind her sister’s sudden death. Dunyazad recollects the thousand and one nights, and the sisters’ travails as well as their childhood, interspersed with strange dreams of death and dying. Dilshad, a servant in the place of Shahryar, befriends Dunyazad and has stories of her own to tell. Believing Shahrzad to be dead, Dunyazad avenges her death with the help of Umar, Shahrzad’s son and Dilshad, by imprisoning Shahryar in the tomb he had built as a monument for Shahrzad. Later she understands from Shahryar’s letter sent to her from his tomb, that Shahrzad is not indeed dead. In the letter Shahryar reveals his tussle for power with Shahrzad: “two rulers cannot live in the same kingdom” (104). Dunyazad then sets out the search for her sister.

The search becomes a symbolic one as the first part of the novel ends with Dunyazad and Dilshad setting out to travel across time, myth and legend. Dunyazad, the descendent of the storyteller Shahrzad, and Dilshad, the descendent of the freakish poet Satyasama set out to help “give voice to Shahrzad’s route to salvation” (117) and to gain for themselves a view, however obscure, of a different future. They decide to find out what it would be like to talk for their lives, as Shahrazad did. They take turns to play the role of the woman who saves herself and other women through stories. The rest of the novel is a series of narratives related at different points of time and in different contexts, narrated by Dilshad and Dunyazad, and constituting an obvious reworking of the hypotext, *The Arabian Nights*. These stories, sometimes playful, witty, and enigmatic, and sometimes dark and brooding, question stereotypical notions about chastity and love embedded in *The Arabian Nights*.

The stories embedded within it are not of Shahrzad, but of Dunyazad and Dilshad. These stories also revolve around the themes of sexuality, chastity and love as in the hypotext, but present

very different points of view. Therefore, as a fictional work that draws upon another fiction both in its theme and form, *When Dreams Travel* may be considered metafictional in the classical sense, as enunciated in John Barth’s definition of metafiction: a “novel that imitates a novel rather than the real world” (qtd. in Currie 161).

The metafictional stance of the author is also displayed in the manner in which the implied author intrudes in the novel several times to invite the reader’s participation. For instance, the implied author introduces the characters in the novel by using the demonstrative pronoun “this”. “This is Shahzaman, sometimes called Zaman, Sultan of Samarkand” (5). This mode of introduction of the characters suggests the presence of the author behind the narration of the events. The readers “hear” the textual voice of the implied author in the novel. In typical metafictional fashion, the readers are often reminded that they are reading a work of fiction, thus distancing them from the characters and events, which help in analysing the work itself. The following lines show how the style of narration prevents the readers from getting involved in the characters and events:

....the brothers—our elusive storyteller tells us –we are happy. They are happy in their legacy, the legacy to rule, having been taught to mount, steer, lord over, from the day they were born ....We are not told if this is the same wazir who will one day be equally famed as minister and as father, but for our purposes his courageous journey may provide the clue.... So much is the background, the necessary (if sketchy and moth eaten) setting of our tale (9-10).

The entire novel is conceived as an act of storytelling. The omniscient narration at times is apparently the narration of a storyteller to a group of listeners. The first person plural “we” is employed in the omniscient narration of the events. The first glance of the use of “we” misleads the reader to assume that that multiple narrators narrate it. The plural “we” is suggestive of the assumption that the story is narrated to many narratees and the narrator relates the story as if the narratees are also participants in the act of narration. The implied readers’ presence is hinted at in the narration as in the following line: ” The two brothers when we meet them are orphans, we also know they care for each other”(8).

The author’s storytelling voice, laying bare the process of narration, and the author’s comments and intrusions prevent the readers’ involvement in the narrative, distancing them from the narrated events by reminding them of the artifice, thus facilitating a critique of the hypotext.

Like its hypotext, *When Dreams Travel* has various subnarratives embedded into and

following upon the frame narrative. They serve to subvert the hypotext in various ways. One such subversion is the displacement of the storyteller of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrzad, by Dilshad and Dunyazad. The implied author asks the readers to imagine Dunyazad and Dilshad as the storytellers instead of Shahrzad: “These measures of storytime, seven days, a thousand nights are pretty conveniences, but their rule must be wily rather than absolute. For an hour or two these women are to be our heroines”(116).

The storytelling of Dilshad and of Dunyazad is compared to that of Shahrzad. Dilshad and Dunyazad narrate stories not to save their lives as Shahrzad did, but to experiment with the art of storytelling. Their attempt is to ascertain the differences between Shahrzad’s stories and their stories since they are narrated in two different situations. Shahrzad’s stories were narrated with the royal sword hanging over her head to save her life while the stories of Dunyazad and Dilshad are narrated with no fear in their hearts and no threat to their lives. They experiment with their gift of storytelling, playing the role of Shahrzad who saves herself and others through stories.

The purpose of Shahrzad’s stories was to bring the sultan back to sanity, to disabuse him of the notion that all women are unchaste. But, she also confuses him with her stories. She narrates stories about both chaste and unchaste wives, so that the sultan finds it very difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion. Her stories serve to blur the boundary between fact and fiction:

In the stories she has told Shahryar she has included both chaste and unchaste wives, perhaps to show him that all kind of men could be cuckolds. But often, in recent nights, she has felt a secret delight when revealing the adventures of a licentious woman, as if she would like to push the sultan a little further into the confusion of reality, and his own deluded expectations of it (130).

*When Dreams Travel* is a skilful subversive reworking of *The Arabian Nights*. It starts at the point where *The Arabian Nights* ends—the “happy ending” represented by the union of the couples—Shahrzad and Shahryar, and Dunyazad and Shahzaman. It gives voice to the silent and marginalized characters in *The Arabian Nights*, whose stories have remained untold or suppressed, thus raising questions about the stereotypes embedded in it.

In *The Arabian Nights* Scheherazade is merely a vehicle for the stories in it. Though Dunyazad, Scheherazade’s sister is present in the scene of storytelling in the dungeon in the hypotext, she is a mere spectator, a silent presence. She is never brought to light in *The Arabian Nights*. But in *When Dreams Travel*, she is in the limelight. There is clearly strong authorial intent

in this and a clue to understanding it perhaps lies in the author’s own words. In “How I write and Why? Githa Hariharan Answers” says: “When I began *When Dreams Travel*, Shahrzad was centrestage, as woman or storyteller or saviour. Then I noticed Dunyazad, the silent accomplice occupying a part of the stage that is almost unlit.... It was Dunyazad’s position as the unheard younger sister, the yearning, questioning follower, that allowed me to step into the story as a writer” (qtd. in Shubhshree 376).

Dunyazad has always been a shadow of Shahrzad. In the venture to restore the sultan to sanity and redeem the people, Shahrzad is chosen while no thought is spared for the younger sister. It is acknowledged that Shahrzad’s body and wit saved the kingdom and many women from death. Dunyazad is never given an opportunity even to test her wit. She is destined only to travel the path of her sister. She says: “And when it’s finally my turn, what will be left? All I can do is live out what she has already described and possessed completely.... I love my sister but I don’t want to be her shadow” (256).

The “voicing” of Dunyazad, can perhaps be read as standing metonymically for the voicing of the many, silent or hidden feminine voices in texts. The afterlife of *The Arabian Nights*, relating events twenty years after the marriages of Shahryar to Shahrzad, and Shahzaman to Dunyazad, are presented through the focalization of Dunyazad. She takes centrestage, unearthing the truth behind the sudden death of her sister, avenging Shahryar by trapping him in the tomb constructed for his wife with the help of Umar, his son, and Dilshad the servant in the palace, and finally seeking through her stories to resurrect Shahrzad.

The voice of Dunyazad is heard throughout the novel. Shahrzad’s voice is heard only through Dunyazad, who now recounts Shahrzad’s story. It is now through her that we read of Shahrzad’s fear, pain and physical stress during her narration of stories to Shahryar. Now, Shahrzad is completely in the dark. Her task is done. She has become a martyr and has redeemed the country. Her postmarital life is merely her personal matter. Nobody wastes his/her time thinking about the queen Shahrzad. It is only her beloved sister Dunyazad, who thinks about her sister’s life after her marriage with Shahryar: “She is filled with pity for this stale woman in the mirror. It matters very little to anyone if she sleeps alone, night after night, untouched. It matters very little whether she lives or dies, because her role, her part in the play is done”(78).

Shahrzad herself had given voice to the thousand women who had been executed earlier. She is always aware of the silenced voices behind her voice. As Diane Price Herndl says, every

time Shahrzad speaks,”...she is aware of all the other silenced feminine voices” (10). Each night when she meets Shahryar, she is aware of the silent suffering and the painful death of many virgins. It is therefore quite significant that in *When Dreams Travel*, Shahrzad is the silenced voice that is articulated through the voice of Dunyazad.

Through Dunyazad’s voice the reader is asked to consider the irony of Shahrzad marrying and living happily with her tyrant husband. In portraying the marital life of Shahrzad, the novel asks whether it was easy for Shahrzad to forget the thousand and one nights of fear and pain she had lived through and love her tormentor. And continuing in this vein, Dunyazad imagines that her sister fell in love with Abdulla, a young merchant who filled the queen’s mind with stories of his travels and adventures, a story told her by Dilshad. Her chastity is the manifestation of her own iron will:

Let go of that iron-marrowed will to love Shahryar, save him, save the city. And it will be gone: her eternal trial, the burden of the throbbing chastity between her thighs that only her king can judge as sickly or flourishing. The solid palace will burst like an ephemeral bubble and she will be free. Free not just for another day, or of the executioner’s axe forever, but free to breathe, to begin her own travels in the time that remains to her. (98)

Shahrzad’ chastity is not born out of love for Shahryar, because the memories of her wounds are not healed. Shahryar’s power over her forces her to be bound by the vow of chastity.

There are other voices too in the text that serve to authenticate Dunyazad’s voice. Through the voices of the subjects of Shahryar, sufficient ground is provided for Dunyazad’s suspicions about her sister’s death. She hears rumours from the palace about Shahryar and the dead queen Shahrzad. Their responses to the events in the palace are brought to light through the voices Dunyazad hears in the remote corners of the palace:

And if Dunyazad eavesdrops at the right place she can hear the echo of one of her own burning questions. How (or why) did Shahrzad die? Only the Shah—and a few trusted men slaves—claim to have been there when the queen suddenly took ill. The rest saw the sealed coffin; the sultan could not bear to see, or display the beloved face dead. (81)

When Dunyazad takes her revenge on Shahryar, his subjects think that the judgment is fair. They opine that the cruel tyrant deserves punishment. If he had atoned for his sins he should have punished himself for killing so many virgins. Instead of penance, he merely grants pardon to his wife as if it was she who should be punished. The subjects are satisfied at Dunyazad’s and Umar’s

act of vengeance against Shahryar, the old sultan. Their voices are expressed in these lines: “Did he think redemption was so easy? A single man’s affair?” demands a disgruntled citizen. Another voice chimes in: “I hear his queen forgave him. But do you think she forgave herself? Why would she have died so young otherwise?” (103). The unarticulated voices of the subjects in the hypotext are articulated in the novel for, the subjects of Shahryar are silent spectators, relegated to the background of the hypotext. The motif of silenced and suppressed voices run through the novel.

The novel also provides a critique of the theme of the hypotext. The happy ending of *The Arabian Nights* is not convincing for Hariharan. In writing *When Dreams Travel*, she is perhaps giving voice to the difficulty readers should face in accepting its ending in which the oppression of the past are accepted with no marks left on the present. The novel draws attention to the fact that Shahrzad, in “living happily ever after” after the thousand and one nights, as the wife of a despotic Shahryar, is forced to live with the memories of the suffering, pain and oppression of the thousand and one nights, thus questioning the belief that marriage is the manifestation of happiness and order in life: “The mistake, of course, is to imagine that a happy ending is possible when you have survived a shipwreck in a sea of blood” (105). The implied author asks the question whether power and love can live together under the same roof. Shahryar says: “But I ask myself sometimes, can the two ever live together, love and loyalty, amicable partners under the same roof ?” (62).

*The Arabian Nights*, does not show Shahryar becoming remorseful for his callous deeds. He does not pay the penalty for his sins. “Shahryar should have killed himself in remorse or at least renounced the city and the world, become a mad hermit in the desert”(105-106). This is the question that *When Dreams Travel* takes up and about which *The Arabian Nights* is silent. The author’s voice shows the underlying power structures in Shahryar’s decision to marry virgins each day and kill them next day: “Women (or wives, or queens) are necessary; celibacy never occurs to him. The ideal plan: find a fresh virgin every day; marry her for the night; in the morning, there are eunuchs, wazirs and executioners who will see to the dangerous women whose desire has just been awakened” (15).

The powerful sultan enjoys carnal pleasures unquestioned. The queen needs the veil of night to gratify his physical needs. The omniscient narrator points out the villainy in the sultan’s decision. Celibacy could have been the wise and justifiable decision. But in the mind of the sultan, the thought of celibacy never flashes.

The novel thus questions and ridicules the notion of love that *The Arabian Nights* presents. In the words of the author herself, “in *When Dreams Travel*, the same story mutates in all kinds of ways to look at love, power and sexuality from different points...” (qtd. In Shubshree 379). The novel with its metafictional mode of narration invites the readers to critically examine the endnote of the hypotext. *When Dreams Travel* thus takes its frame narrative from *The Arabian Nights*, but provides an alternate, subversive reading of it.

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