



THE SPIRIT OF SHAHRZAD IN HARIHARAN'S *WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the theme of identity crisis which plays a pivotal aspect of the techno-thematic network of the Indian English fiction. The crisis of identity is the thematic design of Hariharan's When Dreams Travel.

The paper also focuses on the existence of identity crisis. When Dreams Travel is mainly about Shahrzad's search for her story. It is the quest for love and power and the quest for identity is identified with the journey of mind along times and spaces. Shahrzad, with her courage and untiring will finds her self-identity which is suppressed by Shahryar. And at last she also warns her present generation to remain alert to her forebodings so that they can accept the challenge when their turn comes.

The paper concludes by stating that identity crisis is the most important conflict that people face in their life. But one can surely find their self-identity with their courage and untiring will.

INTRODUCTION

A writer is best judged by his/her work and there is no shortage of either fiction or non-fiction to Githa Hariharan's credit. Githa Hariharan is an epitome of grace, intelligence and wit. She is one of the Indian English women writers who have been producing a body of Indian Literature that is committed to feminist and social issues. She is a writer cum activist and she has also created a separate identity for herself by attempting to write about non-feminist subjects like the question of writer's freedom and the true meaning of education and teaching in the Indian milieu.

Identity crisis plays a key aspect of the thematic network of the Indian English fiction. It is the most important conflict that people face in their life. The crisis of identity is the thematic design of Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*.



Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* is a subversive intertext of *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* or *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is a collection of stories incorporating romances, fairy tales and legends, parables and fables and both exotic and realistic adventures. This book evolved through a period of more than eight centuries. The frame story is about Sultan Shahryar of Shahabad and his younger brother Shahzaman, ruler of Samarkand. Both were happy and contended with their subjects. Their life went on smoothly, until they discovered their queen's perfidy. Since discovering their queen's infidelity Shahzaman stabs his queen and Shahryar orders the execution of his wife, woman-slaves and their black lovers. Then he hits on a hideous plan of marrying a virgin every night and after deflowering her, kills her the next morning. This new policy creates a panic in the kingdom.

The realm's marriageable daughters having by now all either died or fled, there is no one left. However the Wazir's daughter Shahrzad comes up with an intense plan, volunteering to become Shahryar's next wife. Shahrzad devises a scheme to save her and others and insists her father to arrange her marriage with the king. Each night she tells a story, leaving it incomplete and promising to finish it the following night. The stories are so amusing, and the king is so eager to hear the end that he puts off her implementation from day to day and finally abandons his cruel plan. This story-telling continues for a thousand and one nights after which the Sultan is cured of his obsession against women.

Githa Hariharan retains this above frame but her story is different from the legend is clearly indicated in the last line of the first chapter: "The story ends on stage. Off stage it has just begun" (16). In the Arab collection, Shahrzad tells her tales to save her life by entertaining her husband Shahryar, the Sultan. In Hariharan's version, (part two) two women, Dunyazad and the slave girl Dilshad, decide to re-enact the entire event of storytelling for seven days and nights during their sojourn in the desert.

By rewriting Shahrzad's story from a feminist angle, Hariharan imposes on the reader the whole rethinking of the hatred of women so obvious in the famous translations of the medieval Arab anthologies. Hariharan explores the war of the sexes with powerful wit says Anjana Sharma. In an article Anjana writes:

Twisting the fine and frayed fabric of myth and legend, knotting into it her own concerns about women's dreams, desires, their courage, their gift of golden speech, is the story of two valiant sisters, Shahrzad and Dunyazad. Linked to them are two brothers, two Sultans, two cuckolds, Shahryar and Shahzaman. It is fabulous and fearsome foursomes who have come together to fulfill a mission: to rid the brothers of the stain, the scar, the stigma of being cuckolded by their previous queens. ("Manipulating Desire")

From the outset, Hariharan makes it clear that she will take the reader behind the curtain to show them what the original text of *The Thousand and One Nights* misses out or ignores as



insignificant. She recreates her stories of the women who have become victims at the hands of the oppressive patriarchal system personified in the character of Shahryar. Hariharan breaks away from the original version of the tales to present Shahrzad not as a trickster hero, but as a victim who devises her own unique way to counter patriarchy.

The novel shows the connection between sexuality and power. It is a story of how the sisterhood of women, the two valiant sisters, Shahrzad and Duniyazad triumphs over the overweening authority and specious control of the fictive brotherhood of emasculated men. The link between male sexuality and violence is continuously reiterated in the novel. With her sister Duniyazad's assistance Shahrzad succeeds in her vocation by keeping Shahryar intrigued in her stories for a thousand and one nights. Shahrzad is able to heal Shahryar psychologically through her stories. The curious king, having been successfully entertained by the tales, now enquires of his beloved wife who has escaped the sword by her sharp wits, "Shahrzad ... where did all those stories come from?" (WDT 9). Shahrzad is bold and self-confident, and also satirical in answering her Sultan. She is no more the new bride of the old legend compelled to talk out for her life. Shahrzad's response is brief, most unromantic and not designed to please, "From my dreams; only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them" (WDT 9).

The people of Shahabad are relieved of the panic of bloodshed. The two brothers, the once ruthless rulers have turned into living responsible husbands. The two sisters, Shahrzad and Duniyazad, who once saved themselves and the entire kingdom risking their lives, with their creative power, are quiet and silent now as there is no sword dangling over their heads. Shahrzad, by her tales, entertained the king for thousand and one nights and now has to settle down to her routine.

Hariharan's choice is strikingly impressive because the very structure of *The Thousand and One Nights* involves a tale, a listener and a narrator. In this re-textualization attempt, Hariharan expresses her feminist position by shifting the focus on woman, traditionally treated as the silent subject, an inferior creature, and a powerless person. In her restructured reading the woman emerges as a superior being endowed with knowledge, power, diplomacy and wisdom.

Shahrzad is the saviour queen now, admired and praised by the common people as well as by the Sultan. She receives adulation for her wits and wisdom. "Shahryar saw what a heroine Shahrzad was to their people ... And Shahryar, out of his own admiration ... had conferred the title of Sultana on her" (WDT 159). A celebration of the marriage of Duniyazad and Shahzaman adds to the happiness that reigns over the kingdom after the nights of the terror and both couples are happy in their respective lives again. But their happiness does not last long, as there emerges a scuffle between Shahryar and Shahrzad for power. Shahryar loves Shahrzad for her virtuousness and faithfulness, but at the same time he hates her out of

jealousy as she is smarter than Shahryar and is praised by his subjects. It can be perceived in Shahryar's own words – "Two royal heads may sleep on the same pillow, but two rulers cannot live in the same kingdom . . . How could I not rule over her?" (WDT 104). The narrator tells about Shahrzad that "She slowly changed; or her real, usurping nature came to the surface . . . The thought came to Shahryar one day that . . . wise Shahrzad was turning into Wily Shahrzad. One of them had to win" (WDT 159). Shahrzad suddenly disappears and Shahryar pretends to be mourning for his wife deeply. He builds a monument for Shahrzad's tomb and gets her stories scribed in golden words which are actually instances of sublimation of his otherwise envious feelings towards her.

Hariharan finds the text and the tale a corpus of significance for feminists, and, of course, for all women, when read with an ideological perspective. Gundu points out:

With remarkable skill she evokes the grim "faces" of the thousand (plus one) nights; at the same time she uses it deconstructively to bring out the terror, the terrible oppression and injustice, the inherent chauvinism of the comfortable patriarchal assumptions - often blunt-insensitive – irrational that she reads between the lines of the world –famous legend. (150)

When Dreams Travel is a quest novel like *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Hariharan herself remarks in her interview with Antonia Navarro as, "There is a quest for both a story teller and a story listener. The mode of quest is itself a story and the protagonist (and reader) are also searching for a story. This strategy becomes most obvious, perhaps, in my novel *When Dreams Travel*" (203). But the treatment of the subject has undergone a vast change. There is a quest for both the story-teller and the story listener. The mode of quest is the protagonist's search for a story. Carmen Kagal remarks in her article "Fantasy Unlimited" thus:

It's a bit like Chinese boxes - you keep making smaller and smaller boxes and even that does not lead you to the heart of things ... *When Dreams Travel*..., is more like a maze, overhung with clouds and swathed in veils of mist and fog. A host of jinn and ghosts appear and disappear and accompany the characters in their wanderings, groping for the exit. (42)

When Dreams Travel mainly revolves around Shahrzad, Dunyazad and Dilshad who suffer from identity crisis. And their quest for identity is identified with the journey of mind along time. It is written in a self-assertive tone, establishing storytelling as the women's convention passed on, among them, from generation to generation. In the novel, male characters can listen, but it is a woman who invents them.

Thus the stage, scene, and characters are set waiting for the story to unfold, in action, words and deeds. Shahrzad appears to be the only person in the world, gifted with movement. "It is she who holds the scene together. If she stops, if she collapses, if she loses Shahryar's interest or attention, the roof could cave in and with it, all hope of the city's deliverance or its Sultan's redemption" (WDT 7).



Barbarian violence and cunning despotism mark the character of king Shahryar, while his brother, Zaman's personality is crippled with deep insecurity and poisonous suspicion. Shahryar means "friend of the city, master of the city" and Shahzaman means, "Shah of time, ruler of the age." But bitten by the betrayal of his ex-wife, King Shahryar, sacrifices one virgin each night after ravishing her. Naturally, this creates resentment among the parents and brothers of these virgins, whose number increases every day. This leads to serious threats of rebellion.

Woman is considered to be an "embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge" (Everett 76). She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful, and devoted to her husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. It is ridiculous that a man could take for himself countless women he wants, but his right of doing so was never questioned. According to Manu:

A wife must ever remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive. After his death she would never think of any other man. Although the husband may be of bad character seeking pleasure elsewhere even then he must be worshipped. (Quoted in Arora 11)

Feminists hold that care and its associated qualities – empathy, nurturing, subservience and tolerance are acknowledged and stressed by tradition as the emblems of womanhood, and contend that a woman's "identity is defined in a context of relationship and stressed by a standard of responsibility and care" (Gilligan 160). A woman should consider her ultimate duty as to care for and look after the males so that the male members can create history and achieve success. Thus, a woman's status is relegated in favour of man in the patriarchal set-up.

Hariharan's description of the character of Shahrzad indicates the superiority of woman, her awareness and usage of her power for the salvation of not only herself but also the whole city. Shahrzad is a magnificent fighter, fearless, shrewd, risk taking, intelligent, creative, and daring. Like an experienced gambler, not afraid of the lurking danger to her very life, she continues her narration of interesting stories, night after night for thousand and one nights and succeeds at last, in bringing back the Sultan to his senses, and there by redeeming the city and the people. She is a clear contrast to Shahryar "Master of the city".

When Dreams Travel shifts to another fifteen and twenty years after the marriage celebration. Dunyazad now a widow receives the news of her sister's death and decides to visit the old palace of Shahabad. She reaches the palace and meets Sahiba, the old nurse-maid. She asks her long suppressed question about the death of her sister to Sahiba. But Sahiba refuses to give a satisfactory answer. Dunyazad anticipates a mystery lurking behind the death of her sister. Much of the novel is concerned, with Dunyazad's efforts to find out the causes and happenings of the mysterious death of Shahrzad.

In Dunyazad's story "Rowing a Floating Island" she tells about the personal sufferings of Shahrzad which were untold in *The Arabian Nights*. Shahrzad, swollen by pregnancy, tries to prepare her performance of that evening. Meanwhile, her body starts the process of giving birth to the baby inside her. Her few moments of joy and excitement of being a mother, again her anxiety to reach the Sultan's bed-chamber at the secluded hour even on the delivery day and the prolonged frustration and sufferings are voiced through Dunyazad's story.

Much of this novel is concerned, with Dunyazad's efforts to find out the causes and happenings of the mysterious death of Shahrzad. The truth is revealed by Dilshad's story "The Morning After" which comes as a big surprise to the readers. Shahrzad, the saviour queen is still alive. She is now a feeble old woman left to the care of the slave-girls in a remote corner of the palace. She resurrects her past, her turning into a martyr from a virgin, how her quick wit and felicitous tongue beguiled the Sultan and saved herself and the entire Shahabad from destruction. But now she is worried about the present generation of women. This disturbed old queen warns her present generation to remain alert to her forebodings so that they can accept the challenge when their turn comes: "...when the drums roll, and the sword blunted with age, the rusty, wake up to be freshly sharpened?" (276). Thus Hariharan does not conclude but ends her novel with this apprehension about the future of women.

Chitra Sankaran in an article says "Shahrzad is one who far from being intimidated by the violence that surrounds her, revels in the danger and becomes a prototype of the feminist heroine" (68). Shahrzad, with her courage and untiring will finds her self-identity which is suppressed by Shahyar. Hariharan's fictional characters grow as they progress from positions of vulnerability to relative strength. They achieve psychological and individual wholeness when they are able to fight oppression, whether its source is in the cultural or traditional or societal roles assigned to them.

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