



**DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTHS FOR REWRITING
HER OWN STORY: 'SARCASM' AS A MODE OF
EXPRESSION IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S FICTION**

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ABSTRACT:

Literary devices are tools used by writers to better express their ideas, and convey the message they intend to, in a more emphatic manner. These devices thus help highlight special concepts; and, as a result, enhance the reader's understanding of the text. Every creative artist, depending upon his perspective, degree of maturity and expertise, employs these devices; and, adopts a style of expression suitable to the content and theme/s he intends to convey to the masses. Having commenced its humble journey in second quarter of 20th century in the hands of great trio: RK Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, Indian English fiction, today, has marched miles ahead; and stands rock-like amidst the literary world; not only in versatility of themes, but in the varied styles of expression as well. Themes ranging from a woman's identity, undue suppression, and, survival against their unequal status, have duly been explored by many a creative writers of late 20th century by adopting styles suitable to their choice and message. Not satisfied with woman's passive role, however; Githa Hariharan, adding a new dimension to Indian English fiction, hails to legitimately register her angry protest and argues that a woman should no longer remain a passive sufferer to age old taboos, and must dare to assert her individuality. And, among other devices she picks for expressing her angst, 'sarcasm' finds its due place. Through this research paper, I have humbly attempted to critically evaluate use of 'sarcasm' as a literary device in her fiction; as she breaks through the age old taboos like patriarchy; suggests strongly to mark her own identity, and, not to hesitate stepping out of the institute like 'marriage' if it fails to fulfil its promises.

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INTRODUCTION:

One of the most desired quality of a creative writer, as goes without saying, is to captivate the readers' attention and stimulate their experience by providing ways and means to better understand the text. The experts, for the very purpose, thus, use literary devices to help them evoke the admiration of the text and make their writing impressive. Among the commonly employed literary tools: 'satire', 'simile', 'metaphor', 'hyperbole', 'irony' and 'sarcasm', the later occupies its own position in creative writing. To put it plainly 'sarcasm' is the caustic use of words, often in a humorous way, intending to mock someone or something. It thus employs 'ambivalence', even if not out-rightly ironic. In the spoken language, however, it is mainly distinguished by the word 'inflection', with an undercurrent of irony, by the extreme disproportion of the comment to the situation; and is largely context-dependent. Distinguishing 'sarcasm' from 'banter', and referring to the use of 'irony' in 'sarcasm', linguist Derek Bousfield defines it as the "use of strategies which, on the surface, appear to be appropriate to the situation, but are meant to be taken as meaning the opposite in terms of face management"; and, aptly terms it as "an insincere form of politeness which is used to offend one's interlocutor" (www). The literary critiques, however, do moderately opine, and find 'irony' as the inseparable part of it. "Sarcasm in ordinary parlance" observes the well-known American literary critique, MH Abrams in his popularly known book, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "is sometimes used for all irony"; but, to be more specific, restricts it to "the crude and blatant use of apparent praise for dispraise." (Abrams, 82)

With a measured and clinical use of such literary tools, Githa Hariharan strives to robustly put forward her message while enquiring and deconstructing the archetype myths and beliefs propagated by various ideologies and mechanisms. "She critically examines, dissects and questions the age-old norms", observes Urmila Varma, and continues that "the tools she adopts are quite sharp and probe very deep" (Varama, 100). Hariharan, with an emphatic application of such tools, successfully vents out her serious displeasure over disparity to the marginalized lot, and suggests for the alternative modes of survival and existence. "She erodes the age old wisdom contained in sayings, proverbs, stories, myths and beliefs", opines again Urmila Varma, and continues that "her anger finds its due vent through the mode of satire, irony and sarcasm." (ibid) The passive acceptance of patriarchal agenda by women, thus often becomes Hariharan's target; and is hence bound to meet the sharp surgical blows wrapped in the garb of pithy and sarcastic statements throughout her fiction. When Mayamma in *The Thousand Faces of Night* screams on losing her baby conceived after ten years of longing and penance, the sarcastic rebuke by the village doctor shows clearly what the contemporary society perceived of a woman: "A woman must learn to bear some pain...What can I do about the sins of your previous birth." (Hariharan, vii) The

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contemptuous treatment to a woman who disgusts over disregard rendered by her husband is hammered upon sarcastically by the novelist. Ignoring Mrs. Lall's unjust attitude towards his wife whereby he publically neglects her during his merrymaking drinking bouts in official parties, Mahesh comments ruthlessly: "Poor Lall, it's not going to be easy for him, helping her to adjust" (73). Finding herself lonely amid Mahesh's over busy schedule and business trips when Devi reiterates to learn Sanskrit or music, Mahesh's sarcastic comments hail in sheer insult to her hard earned education: "This is what comes of educating a woman. Your grandmother was barely literate." (74) The question tags leaves Devi's inner-self wounded forever: "Wasn't she happier woman than you are? What is it you want?" (ibid) The contemptuous attitude is further highlighted as Devi finds Mahesh (her husband) "far too civilized to raise his hand and bring it down on (her) rebellious body" who "snarls instead about women's neuroses and (her) faulty upbringing" (ibid). Sarcastically commenting over Mahesh's attitude, whereby he is worried not about Devi's loneliness and emotional emptiness but about her conceiving, so that she could beget a child, she says: "after a night of purposeful love-making, he (Mahesh) left the next morning on a month-long tour" (74). Insensitive to Devi's indisposition, he would rather choose to set the issue aside indifferently: "sleep it off...you know you always feel better in the morning". She, however, understands well the façade and thought behind such a cunning statement for "he won't be there in the morning to see (me) drag my heavy feet around my precious dungeon" as "he has better things to do." (74) One would never fail to observe Devi's sarcastic introspection tending to a strong rebellion through monologues punctured with interrogatives:

"Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the thali round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse my body when his hand reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight?" (74)

Marriage is a dream to every youth, and when it consummates, it, along with romance, is supposed to bring the unbounded happiness. But for Devi it is nothing less than a sacrifice; as we openly see her angst towards Mahesh's indifference and materialistic approach to married-life turning into open rebellion vented through sarcastic blows:

"...this then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his finger and demands a smiling handmaiden... So this is all there is to. The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, and I see now that I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor...I thought the knife would plunge in, slit, tear, rip across my neck..." (54)



The materialistic approach to this pious institute is hammered upon robustly by the novelist. When Devi questions: “Why did you marry me? Mahesh snaps: “Whatever people get married for”, and continues, “thanks God we Indians are not obsessed with love.” (54-55) And again when Devi asks, “Why don’t you postpone the trip”, he rebukes coldly: “Why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth...Then I won’t have to make a living at all” (54). That a wife to Mahesh was meant only to beget a child, has crystal-clearly been brought out by the novelist. As soon as he returns from his business tour, he turns to Devi and enquires: “Any news”; and with no apparent reply, “his eyes quickly apprise (her) body” just to find “all bone and flat stomach” (86). As the plot develops, one cannot help noticing sarcastic veins running through Devi’s monologues when she visits the gynecologist:

“Mahesh has found a doctor, the best of course, who will set right, with sterilized instruments, the rebellious organ, the straying tubes inside me. I will leave the clinic with my parts glued together, whole, mended, an efficient receptacle for motherhood.” (89)

Devi, at times, is compelled to ponder over as she finds herself nothing more than “a stupid woman who couldn’t even get pregnant, the easiest of accidents?” her inner-self urging her to “look at the obedient dutiful wives around (her)” who “are born wives”, and “do not need others to regulate their functions and coax them to grow in right direction” (91-92). Her sarcastic advice for not relying the men who hail just like tourists, stands rocklike to all women: “Do not believe these strangers and casual tourists who barge in on their battleships and moor a year, perhaps ten, in your boneless watering hole...” (92). Rejecting the ideological trends earmarked for women by time-tested socio-taboos, Hariharan not only urges the women to retort and bounce hard against such an oppression, but also expects them to launch a sustained counter-attack to carve their own identity. Devi is one of those idealistically portrayed individuals whose thinking, conversation, monologues and questionnaires become the persistent vehicles of Hariharan’s venom. Mahesh’s crude and insensitive behaviour eventually compels her to “write elaborate scenarios in (her) mind for the last act – humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things ... left unsaid”; and ultimately to “do something bloody, final a mark of protest worthy of the heroines (she) grew up with” (95). Her assertion grows sarcastic as she assumes herself to be “the benevolent goddess, above mortal indignities and cravings” ready to punish Mahesh for “trampling on (their) marital vows” (95). Like mythological figure Ganga (the wife of king Shantnu who walked out of marriage the moment her husband trampled marital conditions leaving him alone forever), she ultimately vows to render Mahesh without a wife and a child: “I say like Ganga, for that you will be left alone, without wife or child” (ibid). In her vision she identifies herself with Durga, the goddess who is the destroyer of evil, and decides to respond to her grandmother’s nourishment with a story of her own as she “rode a tiger (to) cut off evil magical demons’ heads” (41). Towards the climax, the heroine envisions full liberty to assert her will and power over men’s fawning offers: “I became more sought after...Men who dared came up to



my ear whispered about each other. Join us...we will be your loyal warriors; we will anoint you Queen” (43), so as to deconstruct the myths and rewrite a story of her own.

The act of rewriting and deconstructing the myths thus hail through powerful and deft strokes of novelist’s pen as she adopts satire, irony and sarcasm – as effective modes of expression. With the help of such robust weapons, she leaves no area untouched: be it the present day social follies or corruption in various departments, or, even the time tested traditional ethos of socio-political-economical mechanisms. “Githa Hariharan is a new voice which cannot remain stifled or silent any more”, remarks aptly Urmila Varma, and continues that “it is a prophetic voice announcing the emergence of a new identity.” (Varama,104). Opining over the clinical and emphatic use of literary devices, she rightly observes “her pen (being) mightier than sword” that hails to “attempt to establish a new order” (ibid). It pierces quite deep, destroying age-old wisdom, dismantling old myths and heralding a new dawn. Robustly questioning the age-old norms responsible for the fate of a woman and her state of isolation in Indian socio-political terrains Hariharan raises serious questions on the passive acceptance of patriarchal agenda by a woman in Indian socio-cultural stratum. In the garb of a wisely knit story around a dashing heroine, who eventually marches from submission to revolt, Hariharan, seems to represent a whole generation of women powerfully registering their angry protest to carve out their own identity; thus legitimately eroding the age old wisdom contained in sayings, proverbs, stories, myths and beliefs.

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