



AUTHOR'S PERSONALITY AND ENVIRONMENT, AND HIS FICTIONAL WORLD

SHIPRA BHARDWAJ

Verbal Faculty
Jamboree Educations,
New Delhi, **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

Every creative piece of literary art, when studied closely, would exhibit certain incident, passions, characters or motives, that certainly reveal the way in which the author looks upon the world. Furthermore, as he stumbles over that very task of justifiable character-creation, he, knowingly or unknowingly, imparts it his certain own personality traits. Fictional characters of a creative piece of work, though not the exact replica of living persons, do possess a good kinship with them. A creative writer, as goes without saying, would choose and develop only those traits of a persona that strike him, and, are duly useful to carry on his business in that fictive world. That means, real people do enter the novelist's imagination wherein they get completely fused before coming out as the desired individuals. The novelist's own-self thus serve to be a great source for his art of character-creation as he plausibly places himself in other people, sees with their eyes, and, thinks with their minds. Furthermore, in order to speak of the society, he dwells in, he has to astutely choose those very persona, and, enliven them appropriately to take on those very challenges. And, in the very process, he is naturally bound to leave certain indelible marks of the ambience; and, his own personality as well. Not only that, in order to be a true representative of the very culture, or, a facet of it, a writer need to be well-versed with it; doesn't matter if he has to genuinely work upon its literature in order to absorb, assimilate, and comprehend its intricacies. The author's own viewpoint of life and its problems, would thus find a natural place in his creative works, for, without having substantially imparted his own personality traits, he can't justifiably create a 'living character'. Through this research paper, I have tried to critically evaluate the impact of author's environment and personality upon his creative works with specific reference to Githa Hariharan's fictional world.

Key Words: *Personality. characterization, traits, literary art, view point.*

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INTRODUCTION

Literature holds a mirror to contemporary life and society in all ages. The novel, an indispensable piece of literary art, presents the life on an epic scale; and, in a comprehensive way, is the most suited medium of mirroring contemporary mood and mores in a highly realistic, and, at the same time, imaginative manner. Furthermore, a piece of literary work is undoubtedly the wholesome product of a writer's felt experience and his viewpoint determined by the intricacies of the contemporary age, mirroring its inner as well as outer face. Quoting Walter Allen on the subject, Anita Sinha aptly highlights the deeper stirrings of contemporary life, a writer ought to engage into, in order to peep into those delicate but significant areas that often remain latent to ordinary men:

"In the literature of an age, its conflicts, tendencies, obsessions are uncovered and made manifest to a degree which is continually astonishing: good writers are, so to speak, mediumistic to the deeper stirrings of life of their time which they are still unknown to, or to any rate unsuspected by the public, politicians and current received opinion." (Sinha, 25)

A novel thus constitute to be the mirror of its contemporary age. Such a mirror, however, would be of very specific kind, the one that "reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it" (ibid). Furthermore, a novelist, just like a child, who innocently stumbles to arrange his toys at play, do delineates and arranges his props suitably. In the very process, however, he is bound to exhibit his emotional relation to the world, and develop an affinity with his subject matter. Moreover, just as a child's play expresses his personal myth, a novel also expresses personal myth of a novelist appealing not only to human curiosity, but to his intelligence and imagination as well. Creation of a character is thus most logical and sensible task for a novelist. These characters, though not exact reflections of living persons, do, however, possess a good kinship with them. Moreover, a writer chooses only those traits of a persona that strike him, and, are befitting to his fictive world. That means real people do enter his imagination wherein they get completely fused before coming out as the desired individuals. "The great source of character-creation", remarks aptly Robert Liddell, "is the novelist's own self (whereby) he can place himself in other people, see with their eyes and think with their minds" (Liddell, 105). In order to impart the desired traits, as EM Forster points out, "the novelist ... gets into the abnormal state which it is convenient to call 'inspiration', and tries to create characters" (Forster, 50). Such a creation, however, is not without leaving certain indelible marks of novelist's own personality. Also, a novelist instead of imparting all the traits to a single character, chooses different individuals so as to make them shy, bold, benevolent or cunning; or, for the matter of fact, tall, short, robust or ludicrous. And, in the very process, as pointed out by Dr Umar Farooque, "he imbues them with his own ingrained colour, gives them a part of his own



qualities, to one of his sensitive nature, to another his pragmatism, to somebody else his philosophy and so on” (Farooque, 87).

It is through dialogues, that a character reveals himself, and, his intentions in the fictional craft. A novelist, as a matter of fact, has to tell us what is happening. He, most often, explains the situation plausibly to his readers. In addition, he may, if he desires, also give his own comments on it. Nevertheless, he is often eager to represent life in fullness. His creative urge may thus overwhelm his sense of artistic unity and balance in narrative, description, characterization, and dialogue. It thus goes without saying that the author’s personality is a very important factor in a novel. Well does B. Prasad quotes W.H. Hudson on the subject:

“...directly or indirectly, and whether the writer himself is conscious of it or not, every novel must necessarily present a certain view of life and some of the problems of life; that is, it must so exhibit incident, characters, passions, motives, as to reveal more or less distinctly the way in which the author looks upon the world.” (Prasad, 195)

A true artist has to perform the duty, and address the very issues which demand serious concern. A politically and socially astute, Githa Hariharan has demonstrated a vigorous sense of responsibility, picked up various sensitive issues ranging from social, economic, political, geographical aspects; and, has portrayed her characters from the various strata and dimensions of contemporary world. In her fictional craft we find innocent victims of social and personal unfairness; the lot, which is oppressed by social taboos, and the ones who represent the atrocious, cruel and despotic individuals. While going through her fiction, we do witness an emphatic portrayal of the lot that can be termed as “alone, apart and enclosed”. If there are silent, relegated and forgotten ones, we do get enough glimpses of self-opinionated and strong-willed rational characters too. There are ghosts and spirits, which move and act, just like human beings and do assist in development of plot. The animals do not lag behind in Hariharan’s canvas of characterization. The spider, the crow, the mouse, the donkey – all work and move as human beings. Even a pebble, a building, or the moon do find abundant life in her fiction. Her own remark is very much apt in this connection: “I love to make all kinds of things alive – whether it is animals or buildings or the moon, give them human features and moods.” (Lal, 2003))

A writer speaks of the society he dwells with. His fictional characters would thus obviously the product of the environment he has been born and brought up. Githa Hariharan was born in Coimbatore, a place throbbing with rich cultural heritage of South India. She grew up in Bombay and Manila, continued her studies in the Unites States and worked in New York as a staff writer. Back home, she worked in Bombay, Madras, and, later, in New Delhi, where her husband taught at JNU. “I have lived and worked in four Indian cities”, remarks an eloquent Hariharan, and acknowledges that “it makes (her) a pseudo-expert on them.” (ibid) Having



worked as an editor and free-lancer; and, subsequently, won the best first novel award in Eurasian region; she definitely stands tall today in academia and literary world.

A socially and politically aware citizen, she is an activist-cum-creative artist who believes that political attitude must come through in the writing; and, that a good writer is not someone, who is making something perfect; but someone, who can dare to respond the challenges on head as a responsible citizen. She believes in taking on the system fearlessly, as she did in 1995 by challenging the Reserve Bank of India on a guardianship case highlighting the fundamentally anti-women nature of personal laws in Indian Constitution. She appears to perfectly compliment B Prasad, who points out that, “every serious novel is sure to reveal the author’s own view of life and its problems, though this may be quite unintentional” (Prasad, 197). As a responsible citizen, she, does possess a list of very untidy, large and almost unsolvable issues like ‘communalism’ and ‘marginalization. Besides, she is quite serious to take on “the various economic, political, social and cultural ways which are constructed to end women’s equality” (Rodgers, 2003). She, on the other hand, do possess an acute inventive power, and is expert in adding numerous dimensions to her characters as she herself acknowledges:

“I found that the space they (protagonists) inhabited on stage was so slim – so little of substance in their lives – I knew that it couldn’t be so; and I stumbled upon this business of adding several dimensions to their lives by fusing their individual voices with real and imagined voices.” (Rodgers, 2003).

She has incorporated numerous characters in her novels. Her fictional world is peopled with characters drawn not only from human world but from non-human world as well viz the animals, supernatural and the ghosts, as she herself remarks while commenting upon her third novel, *When Dreams Travel*:

“...the novel is seething with life. Night, darkness, the sky, a palace, a dungeon, stars, the moon, a window, pebble – all these are treated as if they are alive, as if they are characters as much as Shahrazad and Dunyazad.” (Roy, 1999)

Hariharan is wizard at exploring spaces, both personal and physical, expanding them with enchanting imagery to form a resplendent yet realistic montage. She picks up her characters in a planned way and enlarges their lives so as to achieve the desired target. She remarks in this connection: “I prefer to see my business as a writer as a planned structured way of presenting my business, dissecting it, linking it with other related themes”, and adds that “in *The Thousand Faces of Night* I used this approach to enlarge the limited space of three women’s lives.” (Roy, 1999)

The inequality among women and their pathetic condition in patriarchal society takes a pungent and piercing turn in her heart; and, the result is the delineation of the fine characters like Mayamma, Uma, Gauri, Sita, Mangala, Devi and Shahrzad, to name only a few; all



victimized of the patriarchal taboos, in way or the other. Though they represent different economic and social strata of Indian society, Hariharan is not satisfied with the status and liberty allowed to anyone of them.

A writer's personality does, by default, creep in through his characters' instincts, and, he can't justifiably create a 'living character', without having substantially imparted it his own personality traits; no matter, even if it costs him to be labelled as a 'biased' one, as the eminent novelist and critique W Somerset Maugham, puts it forward:

"What he (the novelist) writes is the expression of his personality and the manifestation of his instincts, his emotions, his intuitions and his experience. The characters he creates and his attitudes towards them are conditioned by his bias. (Maugham, 175)

Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, knit around the story of a young woman, Devi, who looks ahead for plausible means and ways in which a modern educated, foreign returned Indian girl can survive, finds its origin in the exclusive women's world the novelist, while on maternity leave from her work, was surrounded by. Interacting with an interviewer she hilariously hints, how the very circumstances served as a sound source and inspiration for script of her first novel:

"I was sitting all day with a baby who was charming but a very poor conversationalist and surrounded by well-meaning women of all ages, sizes and persuasions. I thought it was an ideal time to start writing." (Thangavelu, 2003)

That an author's personality and beliefs find their obvious way in his works, has well been complimented by Hariharan. She ardently vocalizes her beliefs in her works as well as in her practical life. The unequal status of women in Indian society, one of the key beliefs she wants to take on, continually underruns the scripts of her fictional works. Commenting on the very aspect she herself says: "The questions of inequalities that women face became an entry point to the exercise of my choices" (Dutta, 2003). The audacity to take on her beliefs, has further been proven; when, just like a responsible citizen in her practical life, she challenged the RBI rule on natural guardianship, whereby, vindicating her case, the apex court held that 'a mother would definitely be the natural guardian of her child'. Reflecting on her responsible acumen, Shobhana Bhattacharji comments:

"Hariharan wasn't the first to encounter the law but she was the first to challenge; not as many of us do –chattering in drawing rooms with a 'really this – country' grimace – but as a responsible citizen with faith in our systems." (Bhattacharji, 11)

The ruling by apex court hailed to be boon for numberless Indian women. "These were the women", remarks Hariharan, "some with broken marriages, some on the verge separating from their husbands – who needed the ruling more than I did" (Dastidar, 2003).



Skimming through her fiction, the reader can't really miss the novelist's concern for women with disrupted marriages in Indian society. One would ponder over the sheer injustice, these women are forced to face, as he tries to unravel the lives of the characters like Mayamma, who had but been a battered wife throughout her life; Sita who had to give up her talent of music; Devi who couldn't get a husband but a businessman; Mangala, whose significance was not at all understood as long as she was alive; Jameela who had to leave Elepttai for she could no longer manage to pull on since her husband was dead; and, Shahrazad whose husband was an epitome of chauvinistic whims – the list is not exhaustive. Also, one would never fail to observe the author's sincere concern towards the marginalized lot in society. "It is always 'difficult to be a member of any group that has been oppressed or marginalized over a long period of time'", comments the novelist promptly, and, accentuating her opinion, continues that "when you belong to two or three of these groups simultaneously – as in the case of poor Dalit woman in India or a poor African–American woman in the US – things can get doubly difficult" (Lal, 2003).

The origin and plots of her fictional world can obviously be traced in her comments on Indian traditional laws vis-à-vis the backdrop of their formulation: "The important thing to remember", observes the astute activist-writer, "is that all the personal laws in India are anti-women, anti-lower castes, anti-anyone who was marginal to the scheme of things when these traditional laws were formulated." (ibid)

The fact that Githa Hariharan is true to her beliefs and cultural heritage becomes clear from the authentic flavour of middle class Brahmin milieu in Madras, which she picks up as a backdrop of her first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, has again, for its backdrop and characterization, a Tamil terrain. The novel reflects a true picture of a middle-class south Indian culture. Commenting upon the vivid and lively blending of the such a backdrop, Anjali Roy says: "Githa Hariharan makes it amply clear that to inherit the legacy of Panchatantra you have to be born a Tamil Brahmin" (Roy, 87).

A work of fiction would, thus, surely bear marks of its author's ambience; the extent of its colour and hue, however, depends entirely upon the art and style of his expression; the one that marks his ability to enliven the very piece of creative art. To be a true ambassador of one's culture is definitely not every writer's cup of tea. While many do strive only few succeed in this art. Githa Hariharan, however, does truly hail as an ambassador to her culture. Kush want Singh, an ardent promoter of women's writing, aptly observes that "Githa Hariharan's South Indian world to me is more accurate than R.K. Narayan's" (India Today, 1993, 111). That in order to be a wholesome representative of a culture, or, even a small part of it, a writer need to be well-versed with it; doesn't matter if s/he has to genuinely work upon its literature until s/he becomes able to absorb, assimilate, and rewrite it. Commenting upon the ideas and notions of Vasu Master, the protagonist of her second novel, the author



herself acknowledges of having read over the very subject, the Ayurveda, rigorously: “Some of the ideas Vasu grapples with reflect my own rather eclectic course of reading over the last six years for this novel” (Hariharan, 275).

All the characters of *When Dreams Travel*, are the modified reflections from the *Arabian Nights*, for she herself claims to have gone through different versions of *The 1001 Nights*. Rama Kundu, therefore, points out pertinently: “Like Borges Githa also appears to have ‘dreamt’ sequences, people and images into the familiar tale” (Kundu, 180). She further highlights, how the novelist has de-constructed the existing texts in order to expose the hidden injustice and oppression behind the patriarchal taboos. “With remarkable skill, she evokes the grime ‘faces’ of the thousand (plus one) nights”, remarks the critique, and points out how “she uses it de-constructively to bring out the terror, the terrible oppression and injustice, the inherent chauvinism of the comfortable patriarchal assumptions” (ibid). All these facts do amply testify that, like any other writer, Githa Hariharan’s own view of life has well been instrumental in shaping her fictional world.

CONCLUSION

Fiction is a beautiful creation of an artist through which he targets to address certain issues. His creative urge may, however, overwhelm his sense of artistic unity and balance in narrative, description, characterization, and dialogue. To carry on his task, he, employs certain characters; and, puts dialogues in their mouths. In the very process, however, certain traits of his personality are bound to creep in through these characters’ instincts. In other words, no writer can justifiably create a ‘living character’, in complete absence of his own personality traits. A writer’s own view of life and the problems he is facing, will thus obviously find a place amid his creation; and reflect the way the author looks upon the world, even though it may be quite unintentional.

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