



ART - AN ACT OF LIBERATION IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT AND WHEN DREAMS TRAVEL*

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ABSTRACT

The art of storytelling began when human beings started to speak some thousands of years ago. Stories communicated knowledge and experience in social contexts. Tales begin with conflict because man forever is in conflict either with himself or with the environment which is around him. In the tug of war between man and man or man and environment, a series of issues arise but get resolved at the end and stories depict this process in order to encourage or motivate the listeners that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Stories which summarise or distil the experiences of characters who are involved become a mirror exercise or serve as a leverage to activate the sense and sensibilities of readers or listeners. Stories weave the thread of social relationships and make life livable. The tales enable humans to vent, invent and reinvent their lives. It is in this context that the stories of Githa Hariharan *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel* are analysed.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Crisis, Resolution, Leverage, Enlighten, Vent

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"Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided."-Arthur Frank

A tale is defined as a program of actions – action in a larger sense includes plans, reactions and experience in the sequence of the plot. Tales are derived from biological and cultural dispositions. They emanate from social and biological practices that precede a communication. On one hand, they are dependent on actions taken and conflicts that humans have experienced and continue to experience through biological and social behaviour. On the other hand, they propose various possibilities and alternatives to the diverse regional, national, social or personal problems and thus

facilitate in the course of vindication, redemption and liberation.

Telling stories – that is, command of the word – is vital if one wants to become a leader, priest, priestess, king, queen, healer, minister and so on in a particular family, clan, tribe or small society. Telling effective and relevant stories becomes an important quality for anyone who wants power to determine and influence social patterns, that is, to induce them to take certain perspectives on a phenomenon. Almost all story tellers strive to make themselves and their stories relevant. These stories will stick on in the mind of the listeners, who may in turn tell these stories later and contribute to the replication of stories that form cultural patterns. A tale, thus, created – that is, invented by an individual author – may somehow become myth if it becomes traditional, to be used as a means of

communication in subsequent generations, usually with some distortions and re-elaborations.

In the recent years, old stories are retold from gynocentric perspectives by women writers as one of the strategies of emancipation, especially that of women's liberation. "Writing thus becomes an act of vindication – a vindication of women's autonomy" (Vijaysree, 178). Indian feminists began to cast off the age old traditional beliefs by "entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 18) different from that of men, which was "more than a chapter in critical history; it is an act of survival" (Rich, 18). This has become the diehard need as male depicted stories and myths subjugate and delineate women as the other, the inferior. Male discourses do not glorify women or treat them equally rather propagate patriarchal norms to be followed by women and to make life easier for themselves. Hence, women writers find a necessity to write their own discourses and liberate themselves from the burden of tradition and thereby to portray tradition differently.

Githa Hariharan, a recipient of the prestigious Commonwealth Award, has told and retold stories in her novels, *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *When Dreams Travel*, as a means to liberate women who are imprisoned in the dungeons of patriarchy. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the stories told to Devi, the protagonist, act as a means of liberation from the male dominated tradition and society. In *When Dreams Travel* too, the stories told by Shahrzad, the protagonist, act as a means to liberate her and other women from the tyrannical sultan and his patriarchal oppression.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, stories from myth, and about saints and real life characters are narrated to Devi by three people at three different stages of her life – grandmother's stories during her childhood, father-in-law's stories after her marriage and Mayamma's real life stories during her aspiration to be a mother. Of the three, Devi's grandmother's stories serve the purpose of revisionist myth-making by narrating the stories of less prominent female mythical characters and thereby serving as the means of liberation. For instance, it is said that Gandhari blindfolded herself as a mark of protest; Mansa had the power to

retrieve her husband from the snake skin; Amba avenged her offender; Ganga courageously walked out of her marital alliance with Shantanu when the terms of marriage were broken; and Damayanti had the courage to choose her husband openly. From Damayanti, Devi learns that "A woman gets her heart's desire by cunning" (*The Thousand Faces of Night*, 20); Devi picks up from Gandhari that women protest through their sacrifices; from Amba she realizes that "A woman fights her battle alone" (*The Thousand Faces of Night*, 40); and from the story about Ganga, Devi comes to know about female determination. Devi's grandmother's stories focused on the woman's pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. Devi, who met only disappointments in the patriarchal world through her marriage with Mahesh and in the temporary relationships with Dan and Gopal, learns the strategies of survival and builds a brave attitude. Re-living the stories in retrospect, she understands the implications of her situation and becomes self-directed. These myths of various legendary women help her understand the significance of fighting back and the implication of standing on her own. All such stories of mythological women becomes Devi's survival kit at the end of the novel and liberates her from the clutches of patriarchy where Devi is seen arriving at her mother's home. The entire novel becomes a hopeful lesson for socially imprisoned women to work on freedom.

In *When Dreams Travel*, Githa Hariharan uses the ancient history of *The 1001 Arabian Nights* to show how once the kings used to exploit women. Two brothers, who are the sultans of different cities, discover the infidelity of their wives and decide to marry a virgin every night and behead her in the morning, until Shahrzad, the Wazir's daughter postpones death for a thousand and one nights through her stories during the course of which Shahryar forgets his murderous vow. "He has been brought to his senses by a woman; and with, of all things, her stories" (*When Dreams Travel*, 21). Shahrzad, Dunyazad and Dilshad are the three main female characters in the novel. They are women story tellers and owing to their helplessness in an orthodox patriarchal scheme, they understand the power, pleasure and the vitality of storytelling. Each

in her way, carries out this activity to entertain others, to empower themselves, to manipulate opponents and to liberate themselves and others. Shahrzad was a brave and dauntless fighter who held the fate of many women in her tongue. Her creativity was her only happiness and power. It is narrated that "The powerless have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless" (*When Dreams Travel*, 25). In the first section of the novel, Shahrzad is shown to be a bold woman stirred by the inherent danger of the situation. She rises from the position of a victim to that of a performer, master-narrator, who carefully plays and controls the scene. The writer states that "It is she (Shahrzad) 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 city's deliverance, or its sultan's redemption" (*When Dreams Travel*, 7). In the second section of the novel, for seven days and seven nights, Dunyazad and Dilshad "play a grown-up version – minus swords – of a dangerous but exciting game, The Martyr's Walk. Dunyazad, Dilshad and Satyasama take turns playing the woman who saves herself and others through her fiction" (*When Dreams Travel*, 118). Stories pertaining to the past and future are reconstructed thus through these dreams and their memories. To dream is a form of wisdom passed on between women. The novel clearly shows that women by nature are not prone to travel and the absence of mobility on the part of a woman is compensated by her skill of articulation which is seen in her narration and description which grab all the attention of the listener to her and finally forge him to listen to her dictation. Shahrzad's story itself is a proven truth that imagination and dreams have the power to liberate anyone and everyone.

Stories, thus, told and retold, create, re-create, form, inform, reform and transform tradition, culture and values. Hariharan adds another feather to the indispensability of weaving tales of healing and liberating the soul. The stories retold in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, both from myths and real life, act as a prelude to womanhood, define its limits and finally teach the survival strategies essential for every woman. In addition,

they serve as a means to heal the wounds of one's soul and act as a process of networking among the different ages and generations. They renew the whole community of women and enlighten them towards the path of salvation and liberation. "Devi's final assertion of her autonomy is thus the celebration of the power of the Divine Devi and that of the entire community of women" (Vijaysree, 181). Similarly, *When Dreams Travel*, which is a story about storytelling, projects the power of imagination over mundane reality. It establishes the ennobling effect of art even on an insensitive and insensitised mind. Shahrzad in the novel stretches her imagination in the form of stories to her maximum advantage to tame and tune the mind of Shahryar, thereby taking him towards redemption which in turn helps to strive for her liberation from shackles. Thus, art, in the form of stories, serves as a liberating device, whether ephemeral or eternal, in the liberation of one's soul, especially that of women.

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