

## Narrating to Survive: Ethics and Aesthetics in Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*

Chitra Sankaran<sup>1</sup>  
National University of Singapore

### Abstract

Githa Hariharan, winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Fiction (1993), explores significant issues with regard to narrativity in her novel, *When Dreams Travel*. The narrator weaves around Scheherazade – or Shahrzad of the *Arabian Nights* – a vibrant and inventive story about a perennially played out game: the quest for love and power. Between the Sultan who wants a virgin every night and his brother who has felt the bitter taste of betrayed love exist two women, two ambitious brides, who are the sisters Shahrzad and Dunyazad, aspiring to be heroines or martyrs. The tale that unravels with all the tour-de-force of a modern myth explores a range of issues – the fallibility of narrative and the crisis involved in the act of narrativity itself. It engages with questions of ethics and the importance of aesthetics to ethics.

In my paper I shall be engaging with all of these above issues trying to explore the edge of meaning in extreme acts of narrativity such as in Shahrzad's case and how these impact on questions of ethics and aesthetics in narratives.

### Keywords

Narrativity, Feminism, ethics, aesthetics, revisioning, power

Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), won her the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993. Since then, she has published a collection of stories, *The Art of Dying* (1993); three novels, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994),

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<sup>1</sup> Chitra Sankaran is an Associate Professor with the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore. Her areas of research interest include Singapore-Malaysian literature, South Asian fictions and feminist theory. She is currently editing a volume of essays on Amitav Ghosh and is also working on a project researching *Ethics and Aesthetics in Global Indian Fictions*. She has published monographs/books, edited volumes, and chapters in books. She has research articles in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *ARIEL*, *World Literature Written in English*, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, and elsewhere. She is an Invited Member of the Editorial Committee for the Canadian online journal *The Postcolonial Text*, and also served as judge on the regional panel of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Asia-Pacific region, in 2008.

*When Dreams Travel* (1999), and *In Times of Siege* (2003); and a collection of stories for children, *The Winning Team* (2004). Of these, *When Dreams Travel* seems to be her most forceful statement on two of the issues that are perennially relevant to humans, “gender politics” and the “abuse of power.” Coady and Miller, in “Literature, Power and the Recovery of Philosophical Ethics,” observe that “Literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social forces of various kinds” (Coady and Miller 201). *When Dreams Travel*, which is Hariharan’s recasting of the famous *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*, as it came to be known and celebrated in the West, via the first French translation by Antoine Galland, deconstructs and in the process re-examines some deeply embedded misogynist ideologies in cherished patriarchal texts.

On the face of it, this does not appear to be a novel that engages with social realities. It is a tale of fantasy revelling in magic and geniis, palaces and dungeons and seems to be more in tune with the gothic, the fantastic and the fairy tale world than with reality. In this, Hariharan’s version is not so different from the original *Arabian Nights* or *Thousand and One Nights* because as Mottahedeh, an Arab scholar, observes in the original collection “‘*ajā’ib*’” (loosely: marvels, wonders, and astonishing things) and “the emotion of astonishment... those objects or events that inspire this astonishment” (29) is central to the *Thousand and One Nights* and it is equally so to Hariharan’s novel. Again, significantly, in this recast text, the location is unspecified despite the mention of Samarkand, marking the non-localisation of misogynist patterns. The tale could have taken place anywhere in the East. In one sense this is only to be expected given that the canonical version acknowledges that the oral tales, passed down for centuries, incorporated stories from at least three recognisable Eastern cultures – Persia, India and Arabia and, significantly, the original frame story itself refers to China.

In tide of yore and in time long gone before, there was a King of the Kings of the Banu Sásán in the Islands of India and China, a Lord of armies and guards and servants and dependents.... (Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*)

Here, Far East, Middle East and South Asia are all invoked in the frame story. In the novel, the city “in the clutches of a dream,” we are told, could be “Samarkand, Basra, Isfahan... Alexandria, Ctesiphon, Baghdad. It is difficult to pin a single name on to it, locate this mirage city on a coded map” (Hariharan 29), asserts the narrator categorically. Also in the nature of myths and fairytales, time is equally non-specific. This timelessness, though ostensibly bestowing a spurious fairy-tale atmosphere to the novel, also subtly reinforces the enduring power structures of pervasive patriarchal ideologies. In keeping with this duplicitously innocuous presentation, the aesthetics of the narrative seems to revolve around parody and symbol rather than

with realist representations. All these factors do not seem to point to a novel intent on realist representations, let alone ethical concerns. Yet beneath this deceptive simplicity and alluring timelessness, the novel engages with issues that have always had deep significance in the so called “real world,” for, central to Hariharan’s project, seems to be what Adrienne Rich describes as the act of “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction...” (35).

Let us begin by deconstructing the politics behind the choice of text itself: Why a recasting of *The Thousand and One Nights* is the first question that needs to be raised and the question brings us to one of the central ethical concerns of the novel, namely, to centre those marginalised in different ways by erstwhile colonial and enduring patriarchal power structures. *The Thousand and One Nights* is an example of a text that travelled from East to West and became incorporated into the annals of World Literature and also insidiously introduced and imprinted its aesthetic and ideological patterns on several genres of European/Western literatures starting from fairytales to fantasy. This fact itself contradicts colonial mythologies that laid claim to knowledge-flow being directed perpetually Eastward in contrast to the import of mere raw materials from Asia and Africa. Therefore, the choice of the text becomes in itself a polemical and an ethical act – an act of retrieval and re-possession. Yet it is not an uncomplicated act of reclamation. On the contrary, the very structuring of the narrative of *When Dreams Travel* and its aesthetic slant seems to indicate the complications involved in this act of re-possession.

*When Dreams Travel* is presented in two parts. Part one – entitled “Travellers” – is a rewriting of the original frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the plot of which is delineated in an initial section entitled “In the Embrace of Darkness.” In the first of the following two sections where the myth of Shahryar and Shahrazad is recast, the intention seems to be to expose and raise questions about the ideological patterning in the original as well as the recast frame-narrative, presented in the introductory section. Part two – entitled “Virgins, Martyrs and Others” – once again has a brief introductory section that is sub-headed as “A Dream, A Mirror,” and is followed by seven pairs of short stories alternately narrated by Dunyazad: Shahrazad’s sister, and Dilshad: Dunyazad’s lover. Therefore, Hariharan displaces the secondary narratives to another section of the text (part two) instead of integrating them in the main narrative, as is done in the original. This is one of the main structural differences between the original anthology and Hariharan’s novel. The re-structuring signals that the central concern of the narrative has significantly altered. It is no longer an *Arabian Entertainment* but a narrative with the ethical commitment to centre women’s concerns and to unravel the patterns of misogyny and classism that mar the original tale. To this end, the secondary narratives, which in the original were the tales told by Shahrazad to the Sultan, are no longer in evidence. Instead, in part two, we come across completely new tales with feminist

and ethical agendas, which are very different from anything you find in the original translated Arab collection.

At the core of the ethical debate that is set up in the novel is the connection between sexuality and power. The link between male sexuality and violence is continuously reiterated in the novel. The novel opens on four figures – two males and two females. The two men, the brothers Shahryar and Shahzaman, are both shown as holding a sword each: the former a “mere ornament... a grand showy thing of gem-encrusted gold” while the latter holds another “plaything in his hand, an ancient, blood-dripping sword” (Hariharan 5). This scene, which is described in the text as “self-absorbed,” is presented as a primal scene – an archetype of sorts rendered “shamelessly immortal” (Hariharan 5) not only in art but it is implied, in life as well. Masculinity and violence, it is subtly asserted, have become hopelessly conjoined in this world of ours. The very first part underscores the violence that is waiting in the wings. We are told that

It is she [Shahzad] 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. (Hariharan 7)

In line with the avowed principle of feminist ethics which, as Alison Jaggar asserts, is committed to eliminating the subordinate status of women, in this first section we realise that Shahzad is no longer the archetypal victim fighting for her survival but a bold woman stimulated by the danger implicit in the situation. There are subtle but potent changes in her character construction that shifts her from the position of a victim to that of the puppeteer, the master-narrator who carefully plays and controls this scene. Against the passive listeners, namely King Shahzad and Shahzaman, *she* is the one who is “*gifted with Movement... talking for her life*” (Hariharan 5; emphasis added). This Shahzad 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. We are told:

She throws back her neck, holds her goblet high and drinks deeply, eyes shut. What she does not swallow she holds for a moment or two, rolling the liquid in her mouth as if she is tasting it for the last time. Then she wets her lips with her tongue and begins again. (Hariharan 6)

The narrative is also committed to raising “questions about power” (Tong 160). The second section of the frame narrative entitled “On the Way to Paradise” begins the day *after* the thousand and one nights, with the royal couples sitting in comfort in a shady bower of the royal gardens. Shahryar, we realise, has told her tales, entertained the king for thousand and one nights and now has to settle down to her routine. 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, “Shahzad... where did

all those stories come from?” (Hariharan 9). 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” (Hariharan 9). Her reply foregrounds the power structure in the original hypotext, as indeed in most texts canonised within patriarchy that are designed to gloss over the fault lines between the powerless and the powerful. Whereas in the original *Arabian Nights* the focus of the text was on the wit of Shahrzad and in the entertainment value of the stories she related, Hariharan’s recast text draws our attention to the fact that it is across the gender divide that the fault lines are very often visible. Hence, right at the start of *When Dreams Travel*, we are placed in the middle of a misogynist cosmos. But then something occurs in the text that reverses this trend. After the frame story, where the Arab girl narrator’s position as the potential victim of a power-crazed, woman-hating, Sultan has been briefly elucidated, the narrative becomes woman-centred. Shahrzad’s victimhood is replaced by a version in part two, where two women, Dunyazad, Shahrzad’s sister, and Dilshad, a slave girl in Shahryar’s palace, who are lesbian lovers, tell each other stories, one tale answering the other’s, for seven days and seven nights. Dunyazad who was only a secondary, marginalised character in *The Thousand and One Nights* becomes a central character here. Dilshad is an entirely new character, an ugly slave girl who would not have featured in this patriarchal text steeped in class and gender politics. Also, Shahrzad, the queen, is no longer a nervous girl fighting for her life. She is now the established saviour of the city; the martyr who risked her life to save other women’s and receives the adulation proper to her. Shahryar emerges as a feminist prototype worthy of emulation and in the second section, Dunyazad and Dilshad emulate her in their story-telling.

It is worthwhile to briefly analyse at least one of the seven pairs of stories related in part two by the two women. It is noteworthy that unlike the first section which is a retelling with significant differences of the original frame story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, in part two, Hariharan writes completely new accounts, which are totally unrelated to the original text. I would like to preface my exploration of the aesthetics and ethics behind this pair of short stories by referring to some terms used by Gerard Genette in *Palimpsests*. Genette uses the term “transtextuality” to refer to all types of relations and echoes between texts; he employs “intertextuality” to refer to the actual presence of a text in another, say in the form of quotation or allusion; by the term “hypertextuality,” Genette refers to the relationship of a given text (the “hypertext”) to a previous text (the “hypotext”), the latter grafted on to the former as Hariharan’s text clearly is to *The Thousand and One Nights* (Genette 9-13). It is notable that all these textualities appear in the pair of stories that occur in the second section which I now undertake to analyse. Dunyazad’s version is entitled, “Three Scenes and a Father” and Dilshad’s story is entitled, “Rupavati’s Breasts.”

In the former account, Dunyazad’s father is the protagonist. He undergoes three “adventures” in this episode, all three serve as allegories that expose the decadent

and abusive state of patriarchy under the cruel reign of King Shahryar with his unshakeable thirst for virgins and the moral dilemma this causes to “the high principled wazir,” as the father of two daughters himself, and one for whom we are told “virginity holds the city’s real treasury in its tight grip” (Hariharan 168). In the first episode, the Wazir finds himself in the middle of an arid, endless desert and in the extremity of exhaustion spies “a gleaming, opal-hued pool” (169) in the distance. As he proceeds towards it, he is stopped by a heavy hand that holds him back and a clear voice, which he recognises as either his father’s or his teacher’s, rings out with authority: “No, you haven’t finished... Did you think that was all? A whiff of morality, a pinch of justice, and the task is done? Is salvation to be bought so cheaply?” (170). The voice, which could be constructed as the conscientious aspect of patriarchy, instructs him, “The journey, dear wazir, begins here. Be patient; you will have your fill of the pool” (170). But when the Wazir reaches the pool it turns out to be a hellish oasis filled with the dismembered limbs and body parts of the virgins executed night after night by the king. The last dismembered limb that slides up to him he recognises to be “the capable hand of his first-born” (171).

The second episode shows the Wazir hurrying home to be confronted by the Sultan’s messenger. He pre-emptively calls out with a helpless shudder ‘Is there a virgin in this house?’ When they are interrupted by the call for prayer and the Eunuch rushes off, the Wazir buries his eldest daughter in a hole that he digs in his garden. The Eunuch returns after prayer and asks the house “Do you house a virgin?” (171). The talking house responds in the negative. After the eunuch’s departure the Wazir digs up the ground to discover a plump goat in place of his daughter, hinting at the fate decreed to all women in a chauvinistic male centred society. The second episode ends here.

The third episode shows the Wazir back in the desert hurrying to feed his hungry God carrying the goat on his arm. “The Lord, a gigantic man with wild unwashed hair and red eyes,” strangely reminiscent of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu trinity of Gods, notifies him peremptorily, “Remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion” (175). Again the words are echoes of a well-known *Saiva Siddhanthic* myth, a favourite of the Tamil race. In the myth, Lord Shiva tests the faith of his ardent devotee by appearing before him in the form of a mad Shaivait heretic and demanding that he kill the most favourite thing in the world to feed him. The devotee, who has vowed that he would never send away a Shaivait unfed from his home, perforce kills and cooks his only son. The heretic then sits down for a meal and asks that his son join them. The heart-broken devotee pretends to call out to his young dead son and lo and behold the son appears before them! Lord Shiva reveals himself to the formerly desolate, now astonished man and praises his devotion in a tale strongly reminiscent of the Old Testament parable of Abraham and Isaac. In retelling this myth by substituting Wazir and Shahrzad in place of the Hindu devotee and his son, the narrative firstly exposes the pervasive nature of patriarchal constructions of God as authoritarian figures; secondly, it challenges the

status of canonical texts whether literary or religious that are viewed under patriarchy as repositories of ethical and moral insights, exposing them as ideological constructions that assert and enforce authoritarian, chauvinistic power structures. Dilshad's tale responds to this assertion in interesting ways precisely by retelling the famous legend of Lord Buddha's previous birth when he was born a woman by name Rupavati, in multiple and protean versions. Dilshad's story has an old woman and her husband retelling Rupavati's story to the wandering woman storyteller, Satyasama. Needless to say, the woman's version is dismissed as "lies" by her irate husband who tells his own version of it. Satyasama's attempt to take similar liberties with the story recited by the old man has her ejected out of their house by the angry couple, the woman's will being shown as completely subservient to her husband's. This points the way to the possibility that previous female versions of any story could have been omitted, truncated and corrupted by misogynous interference to produce the final canonised version suitable to a ruling patriarchal structure that then gets enshrined by successive generations of readers as the authentic version. Thus, in the final analysis, Hariharan by merging myth and parody, past and present, seems to signal to us that all reality comes to us filtered through language and that language is linked to power.

As Hilde Lindemann points out in her text, *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, if feminism is concerned with the "gender" issue and if gender can be described as a classification within a social system that normates the unequal distribution of power between men and women, then feminist ethics can be defined as the practice of trying to understand, criticise and rectify this. It is then seen as a moral act that prompts us to perceive how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices. In attempting to do all of these things to varying degrees through her novel, Githa Hariharan points to the importance of projects that "reworld" patriarchal ideologies by revising them from a feminist perspective, thereby prompting the discovery of the underlying patriarchal agenda by revealing their flawed ideological make-up.

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