Chapter II

Writing Female Identity: Subversion and Re-Interpretation of Narratives

“Great books and great men are often full of monstrous untruths about women”


This chapter is an attempt to identify the quest of woman through a study of Githa Hariharan’s two narratives entitled When Dreams Travel and The Thousand Faces of Night. The writer uses two key metaphors ‘Night’ and ‘Dreams’ which are meaningful for women in search of their identity. The nights have haunted women for long, leaving them faceless and voiceless. Their dreams for liberty have been cut by men. In this context, the need of the hour is scripting their story of deliverance. Githa Hariharan re-reads the ancient Persian tale of 1001 nights and subverts the story, to write an advantage tale for consumption by new women Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night is also an argument for freedom for women. In the process, the novelist writes her version of female identity, with respect to the women of the East in particular. This chapter also includes a critical note on the original text of 1001 Nights* and the subversive changes brought into the text by Githa Hariharan along with an analysis in detail of Githa Hariharan’s subversion of the 1001 Nights so as to clarify the abilities of women in general and of the East in particular. It is followed by an analysis of woman as the illuminated subject in Githa Hariharan’s narrative. The last section of this chapter attempts to infer the meaning of the tale for the common folks of India.

*The translator of this oriental tale used to refer it as 1001 Nights (or) Thousand and One Nights. In this Thesis, the researcher uses the title 1001 Nights.
The nations of Asia particularly India and the Middle East have always been considered by the West as a land of mystery and savagery. At the same time India was looked upon as a land of ancient wisdom and the birthplace of mystics. As far as India is concerned, it enjoys the pride of possessing an ancient treasure house of legends, tales and epics, most of them belonging to the dateless antiquity.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the ancient legends have been credited with a kind of authorship in the name of Valmeiki and Vyasa. However, these texts have been continuously possessed by the masses, most of them illiterate and have been disseminated not only in India but also in the far East by extension, corruption, interpolation and constant retexualization of the legends. This is what one finds in the various versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, available in many Indian languages. The stories in these legends have been transmitted to posterity by senior citizens. Some of them have been made popular in several forms of performing arts. With the result, even people who has not touched any original versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are quite familiar with its tales, and their sub-texts and the meanings emanating from them through all times. In many families, the tales have reached the young ones through women members, particularly the 'grandmas'.

For anyone in India, the messages extracted from these tales constitute a cultural value, sometimes a social meaning or a metaphysical truth. Those who want to defy the culture, resist the meanings and values embedded in and propagated through these legends, also, become scholars of the text and engage the text for reinterpretation of the meaning. For example, "Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel retells the story of the breakdown of empire in India and the emergence of Independence through the lens of the
Mahabharatha which forms the counter-discursive allegorical frame through which the scientific pretensions of a colonial history may be dismantled” (Bill Ashcroft : 106).

Many modern authors of India have also used these texts to resist or subvert the very idea propagated by the text. In other words, one gets rooted to the culture by an immersion exercise of involvement, empathy and sympathy with the characters one finds in these legends. The destiny of the common man is better understood by the audience by identifying themselves with the various characters in these legends. In the same way, defiance, resistance and non-conformity are best understood by ordinary people through a reinterpretation exercise by writers, speakers and even politicians. Hence, every tale shows a perspective about human life.

Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly states that Indian writers use myths either as “digressive technique” or for working out “structural parallels” (131 – 133). They can also be used through the technique of what Frye calls ‘displacement’, in which myths are displaced in a human direction to create possibilities of idealizations, which may be difficult to achieve in purely realistic narrative (Frye 136-137). Critics like Geethanjali Singh Chanda, Elaine yee ho and Kavitha Mathai who have analysed the social and political problems, make a note in “Women in India': Four recent novels" on the position of Indian women and their responses to the problems that afflict them. They claim that the Indian women writers are constructing “narrative mappings of alternative ‘India’ through their writings” (58). In Feminist Indian Literature ‘gender’ is a tool to describe the position of women inside local patriarchies and they highlight the psychological damage inflicted on them as second class citizens of a repressive social order.
The re-writing of canonical texts is a postmodern technique. Githa Hariharan renders a similar job in *When Dreams travel* in which she prefers to subvert and reinterpret the tale about the Arab kings, and their queen slaves taken from the well-known story, the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*. Githa Hariharan’s choice is strikingly impressive because the very structure of the *1001 Nights* involves a tale, a listener and a narrator. She reserves the ancient Hindu roles of the teacher and the disciple by having a royal head of a state, her listener and a virgin girl threatened with death as the narrator. The context is made more romantic by making it occur on a bridal night. In this re-textualization attempt, Githa 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. In the process, as one critic points out, she subverts the misogynous text of the original and chooses to extend the Persian story far into the land of India (Joana Passos: 20). In a way, she begins the tale from the Middle East, and then returns her hijacked readers to the monuments of India. In this respect she dislodges the Indian readers from their imagined positions of inferiority and takes them back finally to their original native land. What begins as defiance ends as culturally experienced, highly individuated subjectival position, thanks to what happens to the women in the narrative.

In *When Dreams Travel* Githa Hariharan answers in her own critical, and intelligent way, some of the unanswered questions like how women would be liberated, and what would they do to re-organise the society and family, if power and status are attained by them. For this purpose, she takes up a text, most well-known, both to the Eastern and the Western World. When asked, what led her to this particular story, Githa Hariharan replied to Urvashi Butalia, the interviewer, thus:
I’ve always had a pre-occupation with storytelling. In the earlier novels, I explore stories through two very different people and worlds. So it was a logical move to turn now to a story teller and Scherezade is the mother of story tellers..... Since I wrote *The Thousand Faces of Night*, I’ve been concerned about women’s dreams and desires. As a woman Scherzade uses her words and body, not only to save her own life, but to gain a little more. In my earlier book, the desires were never limited, more modest. Between then and now, I’ve travelled many leagues.... (“Cerebral Erotica was Fun”)

The oriental images of *1001 Nights* inspired many Western writers of Victorian England, including writers of eminence like Walpole, Clara Reeves, precursors of the Gothic Novel, and Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells and James Joyce. As Elleke Bochmer rightly puts it, “the aesthetic influence and the systematic intertextual references to the Arab Collection are well established in literary criticism” (45). Stereotypes of the Orient always focused on wealth, sensual delight, exotic appearances and habits, magic and mysticism. All these stand in striking opposition to reason and enlightenment, the universal gift, which, the west thought their reasonable and prime duty to bestow on the rest of the world. The references to fabulous wealth are an invitation to the enterprising colonial merchants. To the imperialist colonial eyes, even this “fabulous wealth” of these Arab tales might look excessive, uncontrolled and unreasonable, as it was simply accumulated, not acquired through efforts of will and intelligence.

Githa Hariharan suggests in her novel *When Dreams Travel* that the rich and sophisticated culture of the East was given a new and distorted colouring by the misogynous writers, who penned the oral literature produced by women, the traditional story-tellers. But even this corrupted version of the Eastern culture dazzled Europe. Githa 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. Rama 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. The author Githa Hariharan herself remarks in her interview with Antonia Navrro – Tejero thus: “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 sea-change. There is a quest for both the story-teller and the story-listener. The mode of quest is itself a story and the protagonist (as well as the reader) are searching 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).

This structure creates in a reader / listener a predisposition to accept the criss-crossing of the marvellous and the supernatural, because of numerous narratives and plots within the plot. Since “myths are seldom simple” (Robert Graves viii), the reader is confronted with the developments that go beyond the expectations created by a self-contained, linear, realistic narrative which is the model of Western Literary Tradition.
Githa Hariharan uses the familiar device of story within story technique in this novel. It reverberates with echoes from the text of the past (*1001 Arabian Nights*) and at the same time allows daring digressions and departures. Examples from literary history such as Rama listening to the *Ramayana*, or Hamlet seeing the play within the play, clearly reveal the internalizing of the relationship between authors and readers, art and life. This double fiction technique is used by Githa Hariharan with the purpose to suggest the ennobling effect of art even on an insensitive or in sensitized mind and the possibility of art as a liberating device for a woman imprisoned in the “dungeon” of patriarchal norms. She also questions the patriarchal assumptions of the original tale and of the culture in which the tale is embedded, through a subversive use of the devices of metafiction and magic realism in order to bring up the feminist discourse. Thus, the novel offers a monistic world of representations in which the boundaries between art and life, language and Meta language and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack. (Currie, M.:18)

The author’s choice of the most orthodox social milieu of a legendary past for her novel helps her to evoke the critical suggestion of a continuing reality through time and space. Here, it is the narrator, and not the narrated, who comes to focus. As Dunyazad, the younger sister is made to look back years later to the 1001 nights “she sees that it was always Shahrzad who was its central magnetic figure” (*WDT* 105). She was only a creation of the imagination, a young woman of Baghdad who told 1001 spellbinding stories to an Arab king hundreds of years ago. (Shahrzad herself is getting powerful) Over years, centuries and millenniums, she has emerged as the archetype for a story teller. But the other side of her powerful image is a feminist icon, a provocative role model and an inspiration for women in patriarchal society; this is clearly brought forth in the treatment of the character of Shahrzad by Githa Hariharan.
In the original text, the narratives of Scheherazade are continuous (N1 N2 N3 etc). But Githa Hariharan’s novel is structured into two main parts. Part I is the main narrative. It has one short section and two long sections. Part I contains Githa Hariharan’s version of Shahrayar and Scheherazade’s myth, ‘a talking back’ to different aspects of original narrative presented in the introductory section. Part II has a small introduction, followed by fourteen narratives. She does not rewrite the tales. Instead, in Part II, she writes new tales, which are very different and are actually allegories of modern issues. Dilshad and Dunyazad are the actual story tellers of this version. This part has many references to post colonial issues.

The story takes place in Arabia where women are no ornaments of display but a treasure, that too, a selfish possession of the owner. The dramatic beginning of the novel (“The Curtain Rises”) introduces the main characters and the background (“In the Embrace of Darkness”) with a rhetorical question – “Do you not know that a feast cannot be merry with fewer than four companions and that women cannot be truly happy without men?” (WDT 1).

The description of the encounter mixes the romantic and the cruel and leaves the audience curious and anxious. The information that the Sultan of Samarkand and brother of King Shahrayar “is kneeling behind a screen or a door “holding” a plaything in his hand an ancient, blood - dripping sword heightens the interest. There is another sword in the room, a grand showy thing of gem - encrusted gold, a mere ornament. It is on the floor, almost innocent, almost forgotten. Not far from this pointless spectacle is a modestly robed and veiled woman, Shahrzad’s younger sister Dunyazad, crouches monkey like on the floor, waiting for her cue to ask a question, or exclaim piously, to gasp or groan, or sigh at the right times. Her eyes
concentrate on Shahrzad, her words and gestures, on the whole scene - with
the man, the woman and the bed - as if she will never let go of it. (*WDT I*)

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
Shahrayar’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*) Taking stock of her audience, Dunyazad on
the floor, the half believing Shahrayar on the bed, the hidden Zaman kneeling and waiting
with impatience, the shrewd Shahrzad “begins again.” Githa Hariharan writes, “This self-
absorbed scene lives on, shamelessly immortal. It unfolds itself every night for a thousand
and one nights... The scene lives in the shade of a ragged, porous umbrella of a story, a
wandering story, said to haunt travellers on the roads leading to paradise” (*WDT 7*).

Githa Hariharan continues with the feminist readings-cum-suggestions of the
symbols of ‘palace, mausoleum and dungeon’, bed – harem, sword-blood, and uses them
elaborately in the novel. Using the story within the story technique, Githa Hariharan
narrates the events and the disposition of the characters that led to this dramatic scene as
expressed in the *1001 Arabian Nights*.

The book has a well-planned structure. The Part I entitled as *Travellers*, includes
three units - *In The Embrace Of Darkness, On The Way To Paradise* and *Knots In The After
Life*. Githa Hariharan delivers the ancient, lengthy tale, *1001 Nights* in a capsule form in the
first chapter – *In the Embrace of Darkness*. It starts with the first story telling by Shahrzad
to the Sultan on her wedding night, and which continued for thousand and one nights, with
Dunyazad, her younger sister and Shahzaman, brother of King Shahrayar as the silent,
hidden witnesses. It narrates that Shahrzad’s mission was accomplished and the virgins in
the city were saved from the sword of the Sultan. The bloodthirsty story ends with a happy ending- the brothers are united with the sisters in wedlock respectively.

The second unit On the Way to Paradise paves the way for the new tale and the subversion process begins. It describes celebrations and rewards for the redemptive work done by Shahrzad and Dunyazad. Both have become queens and have nothing to do but enjoy the fruits of redemption. Their father Wazir's position as the minister of the country is enviably secure. Herein begins the narrative of Githa Hariharan with the breaking news received by the recently widowed Dunyazad about a martyr's tomb lovingly built and embellished by King Shahryar. Becoming aware that there is no end to her waiting unless she begins, Dunyazad sets out on her journey; "no map exists for the ridiculously small, dark space she has to travel within, a dingey mildewed dungeon which once housed a marriage bed" (WDT 24). The quest for Dunyazad is to establish how and why Shahrzad died, avenging her, if that is the case. At the end of her caravan is Dilshad, the natural companion, or descendent of Dunyazad. "Like her illustrious forbears she is given to dreaming: fabricating concoctions of travellers, virgins, martyrs." (WDT 25). Thus, Githa Hariharan introduces the representative women of three generations in this chapter.

The third unit "Knots in the Afterlife" has eleven small units and does not contain any sub titles. It has a labyrinthine structure and has different traces of flash back details. It contains the succinct and satiric presentation of the subverted version of the original tale. With the help of dreams, imaginative pictures and visions and interlocked descriptive details and incidents, Githa Hariharan narrates the story of Dunyazad, the Protagonist of this section. After her arrival at the old palace where she meets Dilshad, an ardent admirer and lover of Shahrzad, Dunyazad learns about the frequent visits of a young Merchant at the royal palace and the disappearance of Shahrzad Satyasama, a faithful slave character is
described in detail as a helpless martyr. Dunyazad helps the prince Umar, in dethroning of his father, the Sultan. Dunyazad plans a clever and diplomatic scheme, of suggesting to the Sultan to have the marriage with his two brides at the magnificent tomb built for Shahrzad. Prince Umar uses this opportunity and imprisons his father and Sultan, King Shahrayar in the tomb, which he built for Shahrzad. With her task done, Dunyazad sets out on a journey in the desert searching for her sister, with Dilshad as her faithful companion and follower.

As Lakshmishree Banerjee remarks, in the postcolonial narratives, “... the picture of the woman as a helpless victim and the man as a relentlessly dominating master gets transformed to one in which the woman celebrates her struggle and victory against the imbalance and illegitimacy of a male-dominated culture” (132).

The Part II entitled: *Virgins, Martyrs and Others* includes the section *A Dream, A Mirror* which describes the preparation and the commencement of the quest by Dunyazad and Dilshad. “For seven nights and seven days three women play 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.” (*WDT* 118). The next section *Seven Nights And Seven Days* contains fourteen stories, – seven narrated by Dilshad and seven by Dunyazad. While the stories told by Dunyazad are events or incidents that took place in her life, the seven stories narrated by Dilshad are entirely imaginative but deeply allegorical and satirical. The first narrative *Rowing a Floating Island* gives details about the first delivery of Shahrzad and how Dunyazad takes up her sister’s place in the harem during this period. While Dunyazad wants to kill the Sultan (violence), Shahrzad advises her about non-violence. “Here am I, talking for my life and yours, and you talk of more bloodshed? Look at this empty harem. Can’t you hear its walls weep?” (*WDT* 131).
The next narrative *A Lover, a Tomb*, is about the Sultan, the lover changed to be a builder of her tomb. It is always the problem of ego that causes rift in marriage life—prince or pauper. “Wise Shahrzad was turning into Wily Shahrzad. One of them had to win. Shahrzad disappeared; he moaned her deeply” (*WDT* 159). Dunyazad’s reminiscences about her loving home, her beloved and patriotic father, the wazir, her beloved sister and teacher, are narrated in *Three scenes and a father*. The interesting details about the life of Dunyazad after her marriage with Shazman, younger brother of King Shahryar till his death and its consequences are described in the fourth narrative of *The Adventures of a Sultan*. After the sudden disappearance of the tyrant king Shahzaman, it was Dunyazad who brought peace to the kingdom, by ruling the kingdom indirectly without holding any official status. She made the little boy of the sultana the king, after her death. “The young king is known to treat Dunyazad, stepmother, and kingmaker, with great courtesy and respect” (*WDT* 199).

In *The Palace Thief*, the narrator reveals the character of Dunyazad in all its glory. Prince Umar, Son of King Shahrayar, approaches her to help him in dethroning her royal father. The clever couple was designed by Dunyazad and Umar captures the king with his two new brides in the newly built tomb and imprisons him there. The next two texts, *The Slave Girl’s Palace* and *The Dreams of Good Women* reveal the development of the bond between Dunyazad and Dilshad. Dilshad’s devotion to her mistress Shahrzad and her love for Dunyazad are portrayed clearly by the risks she took to help her in escaping from the palace. It was she who gave all the secret details about Shahrzad and her unhappiness in the palace to Dunyazad and boldly ventured out of the palace along with Dunyazad in order to search for Shahrzad whom she believes is not dead. In this tale Dunyazad remembers how she and her sister were prepared to go to the palace as the young brides. But Dunyazad was always treated as a younger and inexperienced little girl by her father. She resented it very much. “I love my sister but I don’t want to be her shadow” (*WDT* 256). Indeed her ways,
plans, deeds, her very thoughts are quite different from her elder sister, Shahrzad. She does not want to play the foolish game, ‘The Martyr’s Walk’ (WDT 257).

Each of these seven tales told by Dunyazad comments and develops at least one aspect of the main narrative and main characters, like Shahryar (her brother in law), wazir (her father), Zaman (her husband), prince Umar (her nephew), Dilshad (her lover), and herself. These seven narratives of Dunyazad gain significance as the subverted and re-interpreted text of the postcolonial literature. The seven answers (tales) of Dilshad, the slave girl, are actually new tales and they are more independent from the main narrative. They are symbolic and suggestive of egoism, corruption and social disparities: they also lay open the snobbery and hypocrisy of the so called high society.

The first tale Nine Jewels for a Rani is about a monster, the one-eyed monkey woman, who is the sick deformed product of an unkempt childhood in the city streets. It ends up being “chopped, limb by limb” by the inhabitants of Eternal City. But even the severed trunk of this chopped monster refused to die even after many days and ways of its mutilation and kept on moaning. Looking at it some feels sorry but the ruling sectors continued to insult and abuse it with weapons and prayer beads. Though there are “different colours, sizes and shapes” in this group, they appeared to be belonging to one happy family in their violence and lack of compassion. The name of this deviant girl is Satyasama and her story is told to the traveller Dilshad, when she arrives in the Eternal city. Githa Hariharan builds a strong self-assertive argument in this text. Censorship, Persecution, Imprisonment without trial, torture, murder, racism, classicism, gender differences, etc. stand for the “different colours, shapes, and sizes” of the repressive regimes, where, such patterns of actions are accepted as standard practices. By creating an allegory of the dichotomies of colonialism in a parodic light, Githa Hariharan has dismissed their relevance as silly
entertainment. Thus in this short story Githa Hariharan explores the cruel and pathetic violence inflicted on the poor monster who just wants to sing her visions as love songs. It invariably brings to mind the three monkeys picture of Mahatma Gandhi, wherein the monkeys are shown as closing their eyes, ears and mouth with their hands. The true human being looks into the heart, not into the mind alone.

The second story of Dilshad *The Well Constructed Lie*, is an attack on ego-centric man. As the title denotes it is a well constructed imaginative story about the Brother Monkey and Brother Donkey who indulged in storytelling to while away the time. It is the story of Azar and Mazar, two brave, wise men who were able to conquer bandits, plague, hunger and warfare, but not their egos. They started building a minar as a thanksgiving and named each story as ‘God is good’, ‘Love is good’ and ‘Life is very good’ and lived up to their old age. But the Monkey and Donkey indulged in debate to decide who the hero is - Azar or Mazar. The pebble concludes the story with the death of Azar who fell down from the pinnacle of the minar and the foolish death of Mazar who died of starvation thinking of a suitable epitaph for the tomb of Azar. Dilshad was cursed by the Monkey and Donkey to be a wandering lonely singer for having overheard their story.

*Rupavathi’s Breasts* reminds the story of the Phoenix bird in which the mother feeds its young ones with blood from the chest and dies. It is about the unflinching devotion of Rupavati towards her husband who plucked out the breast that nursed her son because he tried to kill the father. She remained single breasted, safe from all her enemies. Another version of the story told by Satyasama narrates how Rupavati plugged out the ears of Chandra Prabha, a hungry Brahmin, who demanded that she has to pluck out her only breast as the punishment for her outspoken comments on her guests. But the old couple drive away Satyasama for having twisted their tale and ends up with the restoration of all cut off parts
to the body. This tale satirises the meaningless rites and customs of a particular sect and of people.

The fourth story of Dilshad entitled *The Woman under the Deadly Skin* is about love and carnal desires. The tale contains two versions of the destiny of Poison Skin, a spy. She drinks poison everyday that her whole body is poisoned and kills all her lovers. In the tale Poison Skin lives a life of recluse to avoid killing the Prince whom she is ordered to seduce. But in the popular version Poison Skin runs away from the palace, meets a handsome goatherd who is about to die of snakebite. Out of compassion, she makes love to him and he does not die. She discovers that it is sexuality with high-ranking partners that was deadly. This story reproduces the narrative situation of Shahrzad, escaping from the palace to join a lower class lover. Githa Hariharan shows her allegiance to the feministic view of liberation through the escape of Shahrzad from the palace where she is neither allowed simple pleasures of normal life, nor any active participation in the public power as a queen.

*The Four Lovers in the Wilderness* is somewhat similar to the next story *Chameleon on the Wall*. Both the tales describe the sexual encounters Dilshad had with different types of creatures of dissimilar human forms (deer-man) in the forest and with Lonely Voice in the wilderness. In the last tale Sharzad is old and decrepit, making her journeys between pot and bed with the aid of disgusted slaves (that is the second possible ending for this character). These tales have dreamy details and fanciful visions intermingled with one or two real life incidents. It is through these stories Githa Hariharan shows the hypocrisy of men who would like to maintain large harems with several queens, yet would expect them to remain chaste and faithful. A woman is made captive by her own body.
These are tales told by Dunyazad and Dilshad during their seven days sojourn in the desert, in search of Shahrzad. Dunyazad and Dilshad listen to each other’s stories and Dilshad has promised to play the scribe as well. Dilshad comes up with tales of travels half remembered and half imagined. “They speak about their pasts, dream about their futures, reinventing their lives” (*WDT* 118). However, Githa Hariharan raises the question,

If you were talking (or writing) for your life, what would you say?

Dunyazad, Dilshad and Satyasama take turns playing the woman who saves herself and others through her fiction. Will the story tellers be able to resurrect Shahrzad? Persuade the fourth player in the room to put down that mirror, come back to life, open her mouth and answer their question. (*WDT* 118)

This is their way of re-enacting and reviving Shahrzad; at the same time, this is the device Githa Hariharan uses to rewrite the legend in the post modern context of feminism. The author finds that, both the story and the ‘story-teller’, has a strange life of its own that goes on being recreated over and over again by posterity. As she clearly puts it,

Shahrzad, like her own story, is a survivor. The travelling tale ... adapts itself to local condition to this century or that, a permanent fugitive from its officious parent, legitimate history. And Shahrzad - she too has learnt the lessons of the tales she told. She is now a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies, before her dreams let go of Dunyazad or her descendants. (*WDT* 25)

The novel ends with a stunning disclosure: Shahrzad is very much alive, all alone left to the care of slave girls in an obscure corner of the old palace. Githa Hariharan grants a feminist meaning to Shahrzad’s story. Through a process of distancing the characters from
the real setting, she records the emergence of Shaharzad as a mystic figure. But at the same
time, the victory of the virgin bride over the royal ruler remains still a lone fight. This is
symbolically suggested in the final image of Shahrzad, left to a destiny of oblivion, in a
palace of splendour.

When Dreams Travel is more de-territorialized. It is a fantastic text, full of magic
and ghosts, which could have happened anywhere in the East, long ago. This does not mean
that the politics or the ideological discussions of this novel are less serious or less effective.
It just happens that it constructs its meaning in a different way, more dependent on parody
and symbol, as language and thought games, than on the straightforward representation of a
concrete geo-social referent. This novel is a different kind of text, more in the “mythmaking
business”, projecting exemplary heroines while de-constructing both misogynous and
colonial stereotypes. As Bill Ashcroft puts it in Post-Colonial Transformation, “the
dominant mode of representation of these colonial texts is allegorical and hence, allegory
becomes the site of cultural struggle, a prime site of counter – discourse” (104). From a
postcolonial and feminist perspective, Githa Hariharan’s re-writing of Scherazade’s tale
falls under the definition of “figuration”, and creates new figures that embody concepts and
images, of liberated feminist identities.

When Dreams Travel assimilates the multiple perspectives that provide a complex
but non-confusing narrative. It develops the theme of the power of storytelling and the uses
and abuses of power in general. This is a tale told from all sides - those who have power and
those who haven’t. There is a woman who has love but no power, a man who has power
but no love and then there are others who do not have much of either. Shahrazad and
Dunyazad are on the edges of power but are not ambitious of it; the king, with his three year
record of murdering his virgin brides is at the centre of power until Shahrazad appears.
Shahrazad is able to script her stories from her memory. When it is not possible, she invents or reshapes her tales. Overall, these stories illustrate Githa Hariharan’s point about collective memory and individual voice - a feminist protest against patriarchal male chauvinism. Ironically, the only time power is negotiated between a woman and a king is at a time of murder and mayhem, for as soon as the Sultan is overthrown by his own son, law and order are restored.

But Githa Hariharan points out sharply that this restoration could prevent only more female deaths, but could not do anything by the means with which the women were cast. The readers are to find later that Shahrazad is missing, presumably dead and Dunyazad and Dilshad become wandering exiles. As memory looks up to the past, it manipulates the history. In the same way desire is motivated by the present pains or a network of problems that are to be transcended and left behind.

The narrative mode, parody and anti-reference remind the reader of the artificiality of its fictional world. However, the author’s ironical style, her parodic tone, together with its satirical humour, consistently subverts the novel’s own referential illusion. A characteristic of post-modern and post-colonial fiction, the tone and joviality is maintained so skilfully throughout the novel by the author. The parodic style which dominates the narration is occasionally overpowered by a touch of sadness too. A good example is her description of the Sultan. “Shahrayar and Shahzaman must have become aware quite early in their times of their entanglement with justice and that they, with the advantage of height could dispense it as they choose” (*WDT*9).

Another fine example is how the royal brothers, the king and his brother, recover from the shame of cuckolding by their wives. When they witness how a gigantic jinni is cuckolded (cheated) unaware by the fresh - faced girl, they discover that their comfort is
larger than their shame. This convinces them that women are to be punished. Thereafter they engage themselves in an act of marriage to kill the virgins. The repeated reminder—“The 1001 nights are over” (*WDT* 21)—proves ironical as it invites the reader to look back to those nights and to a few more days and nights in addition, in the blurred calendar of the uncertain past. It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes inscribing then powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. Thus by parody, Githa Hariharan literally incorporates the sexualised past into the text of the present. Broken narration, discontinuity, abrupt turns and twists, shocking and startling conclusions mark the stories of *When Dreams Travel* unlike the linear original version of *The 1001 Nights*.

Shahrzad is the “missing story-teller” in *When Dreams Travel* waiting for her sister “to catch up with her and restore her to life” (*WDT* 113). And Dunyazad “will never forget the pre-eminence of this story, the nucleus of her existence. Though it has already been lived out it still waits to be fathomed” (*WDT* 116). Githa Hariharan fathoms it from the perspective of the writer and the woman. As a result, the silenced and “absented” women in the original story are allowed to surface here; they are, Shahrzad’s sister, mother, Shahrayar’s mother, the slave girls and also the maids in the palace, apart from Shahrzad herself. She raises the issue, “What will happen to you, Shahrzad when the urgent need for story-telling is withdrawn?” (*WDT* 133).

Githa Hariharan’s way of incorporating the ‘so long inaudible’ women involves a challenge of the andocentric imagination and a rejection of the under-scoring of the ‘Other’ presence. In her characteristic satiric-ironic vein, she points out “as for the mother (or mothers) of the Sultans, the story-teller is completely silent on the’ point. Surely Shahrayar and Shahzaman must have required the services of a mother before they mounted their steeds?” (*WDT* 8). She exposes the sadism and cynicism behind the andocentric myth about
‘harems’ with pungent irony. “All kings are collectors. Their valuable items are women of all shapes colours, sizes” (WDT 90). After callously dumping the collection behind the stonewall of the palace they would propagate the myth, “The harem breeds hungry women, a race of cuckolding subjects” (WDT 78).

In the original, the stories often have the mask of obscene and rude male chauvinism since these were actually told/written by male authors/orators in an orthodox cultural context, which necessarily confined the women in-doors. But Githa Hariharon projects Shahrzad’s act of story-telling as a desperate struggle of the imprisoned genius to channelize its creativity and sees her creativity as her only happiness and only power. “The powerless” She observes, “have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless” (WDT 25).

Story telling is claimed as a women-centred tradition, especially by feminist writers. These stories were no ordinary bedtime stories; they were answers provided by the grandmothers to many curious questions of their granddaughters, who are also their avid listeners. As Githa Hariharon rightly remarks, these tales are “ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors” (TFN 27).

In Indian context, these stories are always associated with grandmother figure, who had a story bag filled with folk tales, legendary myths and supernatural stories, culled out from traditional, ancient epics like The Mahabharatha and The Ramayana. The tales served as a window for the children to look at the mysterious, unknown world outside. They instilled many good and moral values in the young minds, helping them shape their character. One of the most comprehensive studies on story - telling and the female tellers has been done by the famous writer, Marina Warner (From the Beast to the Blonde, 1995).
The classical and medieval traditions of these women’s voices have created a popular (binary) opposition between the docile wife and the gossiping one. Warner links the usual old age of the story-teller to the post-fertility period, when ‘grandmothers’ are allowed a voice, because they have less of a wifely role; many of them are husbandless women. And their voice is eagerly heard, since they include, riddles, interesting, anecdotes, imaginative comparisons and illustrious stories. And Shahrzad of the 1001 Nights is the undisputed archetype of the story-teller. Hence, Githa Hariharan chooses this tale to bring out an appropriate and new postcolonial reading of womanhood.

Githa Hariharan does not stop with the subverting the old text which is basically a misogynous narrative in which women have no voice or power and that the oppressors are the heartless Arabs. The second suggestion is a corrupt reading of the text in which the Eastern emperors are looked down by the West. Githa Hariharan goes one step further by beginning her story from the end of the classic. In her versions Shahrzad the intended martyr emerges as the winner over the Sultan. She also escapes from death. Githa Hariharan gives importance to women’s dreams at one level and at another level highlights the wisdom, intelligence and creativity of womenfolk in general. She defends the sexual difference theories and ends up by providing an inspirational myth for feminism. The text asserts the freedom of women, and gives a flattering presentation of the predominating wit of the female and accepts that the postcolonial women have to travel through history, drawing their own judgements. In the process Githa Hariharan is able to foster a woman identity beyond religion and patriarchy. So, her ability to read, reinterpret, reconstruct and extend the tale, shaping them into a myth of feminism grants her an exalted status among the Indian women writers of today. This notion of storytelling as a key strategy of feminist culture finds its echo in Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe too. Indira Ganesan also engages this technique in both her novels, The Journey and Inheritance.
Githa Hariharan deconstructs the known text to import her views on woman’s power which she finds lying concealed between the lines of the source text such as, “He, (the Sultan) has been brought to senses by a woman.... with her stories” (WDT 21). At the same time she notes that Shahrzad’s ecriture goes unacknowledged because Shahrayar praises her only for her charity, a patriarchal value imposed exclusively on women - and not for her creative talent. But an extension of the female ecriture takes place in the ‘dreams’ and ‘mirrors’ of the Seven Nights and days of Dilshad and Dunyazad, the slave girl and the younger queen, who listen to each other’s stories, taking turns to play the woman who had saved herself and others through her fiction. They reconstruct their individual past, the terror and sadness, the moments of daring and the subsequent banality, their role play. The tales are funny and painful, and told with magic realism. Dilshad thus invites: “you and I have a script of our own - a story or two waiting to be told, our texts of gold to be written, every page remembering us to posterity” (WDT 107).

The novel concludes with a vision of Shahrzad - now an old woman - which brings past, present, and future together, curving into one another, “a circle with no beginning or end” (WDT 276). “I fought for myself and yes, for you as well. And you - what will you do when your turn comes? When the drums roll, and the sword blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to be freshly sharpened?” (WDT 276). This question of Shahrzad to the young girls, is both a challenge and warning. The novel ends with (not concludes)a note, evoking the struggle of the earlier women and cautioning the future women that “the day...cannot last forever, the very real dangers may still be lurking behind “The Morning After” the 1001 dark nights. Shahrzad’s question affirms the fact that dark nights have been extending from the past into the present.
The 1001 Nights is a text that travelled from the East to the West, as a part of a wider flow of products arriving from the colonised land. It reveals the fact, that cultural influences were always exchanged between colonial centre and colonies for centuries. This text, indeed, has stood the test of time and displacement remaining as the document of mixed, shared cultural heritage enjoying the status of the world literature. It has proved the existence of this mixed, shared cultural heritage. Githa Hariharan’s rewriting of such a widely known canonical text has actually enriched this artistic and cultural exchange. Again, in the later part of the narrative, she details a violent dynastic succession of Prince Umar, who is tired of his father’s obsessive squandering of money on monuments, imprisons his father in the Mausoleum itself and ascends the throne. Such historical references and reproductions reveal the subtle way in which Githa Hariharan uses the references to Epic, History, literature, and architecture to claim the contribution of the ‘East’ to the World culture and her clever effort to transcend the old dichotomies and obsolete conceptual divisions of the East and West. In this way, she makes her postcolonial position explicit.

Though Githa Hariharan has based her novel on the old 1001 Nights, there are marked differences between the original and the rewritten version. These deviations and differences reveal how Githa Hariharan deconstructs many elements of the original text and her suggestive notes on these points. The original text is divided into numbered nights of secondary narratives, which are inserted into the main narrative - the story of Shahrayar and Scheherazade. Githa Hariharan’s novel has two parts - Part one gives the full development of the main narrative and the opening scene is treated by Githa Hariharan as the primal scene, an archetype of an endlessly repeated scene, “this self absorbed scene (which) lives on, shamelessly immortal” (WDT 7). The deconstruction process begins with this scene - with the description of the main characters. The female character does the active role and
the male characters, especially King Shahrayar, who is the symbol of power and violence, is the silent listener. The silence of the masculine characters, Sultan Shahrayar and his brother, Shahzaman, is however marked by the power of the Sultan through the dripping sword held by Shahzaman, waiting for his kill.

Power is the identity for male characters especially for kings, who are part of a dynasty in which power is bequeathed from father to son. Though these brothers seem to be carrying on their legacy ("to rule, to mount, steer, lord over") as kings, as rulers, seizures of Power and dispensers of Justice, in reality they do not live up to the expectations of the people - their subjects. They possess neither inherent wisdom nor acquired knowledge to rule their people with love and justice. Barbarian violence and cunning despotism mark the character of king Shahrayar, while his brother, Zaman's personality is crippled with deep insecurity and poisonous suspicion. Shahrayar 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 Shahrayar, 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. Consequently, King Shahrayar places his chamber in the dungeons of the palace, where he felt safe from the anger of the rebellious people. It is in this dungeon, with the sword hidden behind in the hands of Zaman, Shahrzad, the victim, the virgin begins her martyr's walk of 'heroism'. She is the only heroine left in charge of the initial tableau vivant and the one "gifted with movement".... "talking for her life." In this scene, everything is upside down or vice versa - The powerful king is a silent listener; the sword, symbol of power and violence, is inactive in the bed and in the hands of Zaman, who is hidden. Zaman, King of Samarkand and brother of Sultan Shahrayar, crouches like a scheming villain behind a screen to kill a helpless, meek bride every morning. While thousands of soldiers wait to carry out his orders
given by a slight nod, Zaman behaves like a villainous footman, killing a helpless woman so unjustly for no crime or fault committed by her. From the beginning till the end, Githa Hariharan’s version of this old tale treats the theme in a post colonial manner, upholding feminine issues and characters so descriptively. It is the heroines who have heroic qualities and play the game of Martyrs to save the people and the country from the unjust, violent and despotic kings.

Man-woman relationship is very often a question of possession and ascertaining one’s authority. The patriarchal ideology is very strong in restraining a woman’s mobility and freedom. It silences the woman and keeps watch over the women’s activities. Githa Hariharan feels, the elements and the values of loyalty and extra marital relationship have to be read in this background. In 1001 Nights the apparent fight is between the word and the sword, but the inherent issue is that which concerns sexuality and freedom. Female reading of the text naturally subverts the patriarchally conditioned values imposed on women. In contrast with the original text, Githa 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 1001 days and succeeds at last, in bringing back the Sultan to his senses, (belief and faith in woman and her chastity) and there by redeeming the city and the people. She is a clear contrast to Shahrayar “Master of the city” and to Mumtaj Mahal “chosen one of the palaces,” because she cares for the city, for the common people and their lives and hence saves them from the despotic king, risking her very life.
The power to utter the word into existence, to speak the words that create legends, history, fantasy religion, poetry and all else is the stuff of *When Dreams Travel*. Shahrzad’s speaking made her a saviour and martyr; Dunyazad’s and Dilshad’s is the other script, the text that women write when there is no Sultan to chop off their heads. Satyasama, the poet women’s tongue was ripped out and burnt for speaking a truth no one wished to hear. Shahrzad’s tongue saved her life, Satyasama’s tongue ended hers. Both live on in Dunyazad and Dilshad’s tales of women wronged and heroic women. “Only those locked up in hovels and dungeons and places can see and hear their dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them” (*WDT* 20).

Githa Hariharan comments about the creativity of Shahrzad in terms of terror. She envisions Shahrzad as the helpless woman in an orthodox patriarchal scheme, who must and can survive only by means of her consummate skill of creativity. She is the frenzied and compulsive storyteller imprisoned in the harem during the day and at night in the dungeon of a lecherous, chauvinists’ powerful patriarch. In the grim nuptial bed of the palace dungeon, she is forced to create at sword point. Thus, the novel highlights the compulsion of the speaker(s) to tell a story, which is as much like the compulsion of a writer. She questions and also accepts the task of telling interesting stories - the only possible redemption for a woman in her situation. One is struck by the futility and banality of the ‘real’ life of the ‘real’ woman as perceived by Githa Hariharan’s penetrating feminist insight, and pinpointed particularly in the last chapter, “The Morning after.” At one level of perception, the predicaments of the woman and the author get merged in the symbol of the dungeon, as Dunyazad tries to recapture the memory of the 1001 nights. “No map existed for the ridiculously small, dark space she has to travel within, a dinghy mildewed dungeon” (*WDT* 24). Significantly, in order to reach this dungeon one has to climb up 500 steps and go down another 500(*WDT* 45-46). The novel rests on the principle of this sustained
opposition; the construction of a fictional illusion and the laying bare of that illusion, the creation of a fiction and making a statement about that creation. The two processes go on simultaneously and react upon one another to dissolve the borderlines between creation and interpretation.

The traditionally silent women of The Arabian Nights are given their voices in *When Dreams Travel* by Githa Hariharan. A beautiful mirror, which Dilshad (‘Happy Heart’) the slave girl, shows to Dunyazad hinting the story connected to it, introduces the second possibility of Shahrzad’s disappearance. She starts with this note“…there was a young man a traveller and a foreigner who could tell tales of his travels as merchant,” (*WDT* 76) which gives a picture of the whole tale and inspires Dunyazad to have a vision of Shahrzad’s romance with the young man - a happy smiling Shahrzad, looking younger in a carefree mood. This scene is important since it indicates that Shahrzad is not only the saviour of the city but also the subject matter of the tales. The character traits of Dunyazad’s personality clearly indicates that she is not only an ardent listener, a clever follower, a shrewd descendent, a true heiress and sincere successor of Shahrzad, but also an invincible warrior and a powerful dreamer. In the beginning of the novel, she is seen crouching like a monkey on the floor, waiting” and later grows up to be a second Shahrzad, elastic, shadowy, massive, a king maker, and a matriarch of impressive proportions towards the end.

Though man and woman are complementary to each other, in the absence of true love, struggle for power becomes much prevalent. In the patriarchal society, domination of male members in almost all aspects of social and family life is taken for granted. G.D.Barche rightly comments, “the position of woman in general and Indian woman in particular has been paradoxical. That is, she has been the key person, the master figure in
the family, and yet she has lived the life of slavery, subjugation, suffering and suppression” (17). The patriarchal historical legends, popular religious references, cultured traditions, partial philosophical systems, and biased gender preferences, supported and strengthened the practices of patriarchial set up. The acknowledgement of differences in the priorities of groups of women differently situated proved that universal feminist theories have a limited reach, because what may seem relevant from a western-based point of view may not coincide with the actual needs of the women who live by other frames of civilization. All the same in our postcolonial times, certain women writers offer a critique of local patriarchies from a feminist point of view, advocating an agenda for social reform that would improve and set right the position of women in the society. From a postcolonial angle, certain other women writers survey the post independent nation, confronting its failures and tensions and try to articulate the disconnection between individual and the state which is often compensated by alternative patterns of collective identity. But some of the recent women writers like Githa Hariharan, focus on feminine identities and the inner conflict of deviant women characters, and their demands and aspirations in their search for alternative roles as women, are also recorded by the author. This calls for a combined critical frame, developed out of feminist and postcolonial theories.

Unlike the original version, Githa Hariharan’ text reveals the fact that not only in the game of love, but also in the game of power, women could prove to be superior to men. When they were young, Shahrzad and Dunyazad, used to play the martyrs game at home. Shahrzad dons the garment of Martyr by risking her life in becoming the bride of King Shahrayar, who kills a virgin bride every day. But she accomplishes her task and saves the people and the king. And in her later years, she becomes a liberated woman, escaping from the drudgeries’ of the harem. As for Dunyazad, she becomes the king - maker. It is this
aspect that is most striking in the novel. Dunyazad as the younger sister of Scheherazade, has a role to play in the plan of Scheherazade in the original text of the *1001 Nights*.

As soon as I come to the Sultan, I will pray him to allow you, to be in the bride-chamber that I may enjoy your company this one night more. If I obtain that favour, as I hope to do, remember to awake me to-morrow; ... my sister, if you be not asleep, I pray you that till day break would you tell me one of the fine stories of which you have read so many. (*Oxford World's classics*, XVI)

The portrayal of the character development of Dunyazad from a supportive role of the story-teller Shahrzad, who is the martyr, redeemer and saviour of the people of Shahabad city to the role of protagonist, emphasizes Githa Hariharan’s arguments against the Traditional Fundamentalism of the colonial West. Dunyazad, born of the world, Queen Mother of Samarkand and the widow of Sultan Shahzaman, receives the news that Shahrzad, “the invincible warrior, her terrifying sister is now ready for her final reward, a martyr’s tomb lovingly built and embellished by Shahrayar, (*WDT* 22). At once, she “sets out on a sandy journey in male disguise and returns to Shahabad, to the palace, where her sister proved her mettle as a warrior, because the battle is not over” (*WDT* 37).

With her shrewd intelligence, she understands the clues given by Dilshad, the slave girl about the disappearance of Shahrzad for which a young merchant traveller may be responsible. She pieces the plot together bit by bit, glosses over cracks with her ingenious plaster, and makes a complete entity. The vision of Shahrzad with her young lover answers her doubts about the ‘disappearance’ of Shahrzad. As an experienced Politician, she makes her moves and helps the discontented Prince Umar in capturing the throne from his father King Shahryar and emerges as the kingmaker.
Unlike Shahrayar, who was hated by the subjects - especially the angry father, shamed brothers, and desperate mothers and sisters who were intent on avenging their murdered virgin daughters - Dunyazad was loved and respected by the people in her kingdom Samarkand as well as Shahabad. Hence with the help of the slave girl, Dilshad, she plans to dethrone King Shahrayar and helps the Prince in ascending to the throne. Like a veteran and seasoned schemer, she avenges the King for the sake of Shahrzad. Once this task of revenge is accomplished, she steps out on a search for her sister Shahrzad, with Dilshad, the slave girl.

Dunyazad, is the real 'king maker'. Not only her rule but her very tale is the source of inspiration for other women like Dilshad, her slave and Dunyazad, her younger sister. The fact that liberating myths provide role models in many ways to its readers/listeners is also indicated by Githa Hariharan through this scene. Dreams, visions, and mirror - bring about the sudden twists in the plot of the novel. Githa Hariharan claims that they are lessons of survival to women. Dunyazad's dreams and visions of Shahrzad "who may be a commoner in the company of royals, but he is no plaything" (WDT 97) is very important because it refers to the lover of the lower social class. Though it falls in the tradition of the original stories of adultery, it is a different story for it is a women's version. It is the courage of Shahrzad in her escape, not the adultery, that which is stressed. The act of running away from the palace is a symbol of masculine patriarchal power. It is a daring action, an act of breaking the control, the husband was supposed to have over his wife.

Apart from Dilshad's reference, there is another indirect piece of internal evidence in the structure of the novel - a tale in the second part The Woman under the Deadly Skin which reproduces the narrative situation of Shahrzad, escaping from the palace to join a lover of lower class. Shahrzad's escape from the palace is a liberating alternative to the
secluded life she has in the harem, where both the simple pleasures of a normal and ordinary house - wife as well as the thrills and joys of the powerful public life as the Queen or King’s wife are denied.

In the novel, *When Dreams Travel* it is Dunyazad who is portrayed as the protagonist. The development activities at Samarkand which she executed, ‘healed’ the wounds made by the previous king Shahzaman her husband, who has disappeared suddenly. The city limps back to normalcy “the dust settles on the ravaged city as if the storm has passed” (*WDT* 197). The city seems to have turned briefly into the queen’s ally. After a short period of one year she passes on the reins to the young prince, her predecessor’s child whom, she sees is more fit to rule than her son. The new king, trained by Dunyazad, is austere, but tolerant and God-fearing. He treats Dunyazad stepmother and King Maker, with great courtesy and respect. The boy on the throne and the silent, inhibited army, confused elders of the courts and discontented and poverty stricken people who underwent tortures under the rule of the previous, suspicious and tyrannical King Zaman. Dunyazad braved the trying situation very calmly and quite skilfully and brought back peace and hope by her efficient administration within a year. She does not claim the title of Sultana. Her greatness lies in this contentment with her unofficial status. Passing on the power to the trained new king, she retreats to invisibility. Thus Dunyazad proves to be better than her male counter parts, King Shahrayar and Shahzaman. More so, she surpasses even her martyr sister Shahrzad, in her greatness as a silent King Maker. Githa Hariharan’s dig at the patriarchial fundamentalism is indeed a strong blow to male ego.

The enchanting narrative skill of Githa Hariharan explores the pathetic details in the original text mercilessly. She reveals that pride is the only feeling that structures the lives of the male characters, the royal brothers. If the adultery of their wives broke their hearts, the
discovery of another man (the Jinni) being betrayed more easily and indecently than them heals their broken hearts instantly. Besides, they could have imposed celibacy on woman as punishment for their crime of adultery, instead of killing all the new wives. This ironical deconstruction of the original by Githa Hariharan erodes its credibility and asserts its rewriting. Apart from this deconstruction, she also uses certain deviations from the canonised version, to emphasize the fact that, her narrative is about the “off-stage” events of contemporary society. She closes her summary of the canonised version of “Arabian Nights” thus: “The story ends on stage. Off-stage it has just begun” (WDT 16). This is when Githa Hariharan’s re-writing of the legendary tales starts. The witnessing of an old static story on stage is over and a new story, in ‘real / fictional life,’ women’s version of the tale, is going to be told “Off stage.” Thus begins Githa Hariharan’s feminist re-writing of the legendary tale.

The absence of the realist referent to time/space in this novel makes it a sort of allegory with effective forms of social criticism. Githa Hariharan considers primarily women’s views and lives, reinventing everything that could have possibly been omitted from a previous women’s collection, truncated and corrupted by misogynous interference. This feminine version fits and exists actually within the form of the plot, written first hand by the vizier of the Sultan who was called to take note of Shahrzad’s stories - the first masculine hand intervening in a woman’s oral text. In the beginning of the ‘off Stage’ narrative of Githa Hariharan, King Shahrayar asks Shahrzad, “Where did all those stories come from? Shahzaman and I have read and studied more than you have. Certainly we have travelled more, seen marvels and lands and wickedness you can only imagine.” She, replies, ‘I don’t have a sword, so it seems I cannot rule, I cannot travel, I don’t care to weep. But I can dream.’... ‘My dreams? They’re nothing - just rubbish pile
of rough uncut stones! ‘Besides, adds Shahrzad, darting a ‘teasing look at Shahrayar, ‘only those locked up in hovels and dungeons and palaces can see and hear those dreams. Only those whose necks are naked and at risk can understand them’. \textit{(WDT’20)}

Though the Sultan is persistent, Shahrzad, free from the fear of imminent death, falls silent, now that her arduous travels are over. This is the nucleus of Githa Hariharan’s feminist perspective and her postcolonial presentation of the power and status of women.

Shahrzad is a good example of a positive reformulation of feminist identities, reversing the traditional victim status of women, rising to a position of empowerment, even in the most adverse circumstances. The women whose lives are restricted and confined to the harem by the kings, the women who are denied access to any aspect of public life, the women who are treated as second-rate citizens, subjugated to the power of the kings, are objects, possessions and or ornaments. Since all aspects of power and identity are closed to women, they resort to one and only power, namely, sexuality (desire). Hence when a man, (more so, in the case of King), is cheated and fooled by the woman by her adultery the king feels he is totally defeated. So, from a masculine dynastic point of view which is the basis of identity to rule, it is neither wisdom nor the ability to promote justice that is real. On the other hand, it is sheer competition with women. So, even from their private realm, women’s behaviour could un-man the most powerful of kings. Githa Hariharan seems to give a sarcastic dig at this point that, for centuries, women (the so called weaker sex) were subjugated and confined to ‘dungeon’ like spheres by the masculine patriarchy, so that women could have no access to prove their superiority.

Another important change of perspective in Githa Hariharan’s novel, in relation to the original version of the tales, is the change in main character. Githa Hariharan builds her
plot around the forgotten and less significant younger sister of Shahrazad, Dunyazad. The narrative starts with Dunyazad’s departure from her home city when she is informed of Shahrazad’s death. She sets out on a journey, which is the precursor of new journeys and new nights, to find out what happened to her sister. This journey resembles the journey in the canonised version where Shahzaman sets out on a journey to visit his brother, King Shahryar, after 20 years, on an invitation from him. But in the novel of Githa Hariharan, it is the two sisters, not brothers who are searching for each other, and Dunyazad, travels secretly to Shahabad, to find out what the murderous Sultan has to do with the “sudden death” of her sister and to avenge it, if need be. The character of Dunyazad is developed with the narrative structure of the plot.

Githa Hariharan offers two possibilities for the destiny of Shahrzad, the saviour of the city and the Sultan’s redeemer, who walks back to the women’s wing of the palace. The first possibility is told in the last talk of the novel - Shahrzad, growing old, attended by the slave girls, decaying in the empty life of the harem. “She sees her past, their futures, curving one into the other, a circle with no beginning or end (WDT 275). She asks them, this old warrior in times of peace; ‘I fought for myself, and yes, for you as well. And you – what will you do when your turn come?’” (WDT 276). Githa Hariharan has used the tales of Arabian nights in a novel way with a feminist touch. She has not only given a female reading of the text but she has successfully subverted the text, particularly the concept of misogyny, the colonial reading of the eastern emperors by the west, and has gone one step further in extending the tale in her new book, When Dreams Travel. Thus Githa Hariharan’s text includes allegorical tales of her own appended to the already available Arabian tales. It would be appropriate to describe her narrative as a feminist criticism of an old tale with her own notes of new tales about women’s freedom, dreams and desires.
Githa Hariharan uses the character of Shahrzad as a metaphor, to explore the power struggles between men and women, ruler and the ruled and within the family. In her first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the protagonist, Devi’s return to her mother completes the cycle of the story, but indicates that the cycle will go on. Similarly, in *When Dreams Travel* Shahrzad, the storyteller becomes old, but the story-telling continues. Similarly herself sacrifice, redemptive act, daring and diligent use of her creative imagination, her courageous act of liberation also continues, more so, her ‘dreams’ and ‘travels,’ of women who are victims of power.

Githa Hariharan was recognized as a voice of new fiction when her novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1993. The three women characters, Sita, Devi and Mayamma dealt with in the novel are in a sense, parts of a composite Devi figure, and one’s progress or failure feeds into the others. The name Devi acquires impressive connotations interpreted within the context of classical Hindu Mythology. In *Classical Hindu Mythology* translated and edited by Cornelia Dimmitt, J.A.B., Van Bitumen, it is noted thus:

In Hindu Mythology, the wife of Siva has several names. She is both benevolent and fierce. As a loyal wife, she is known as Parvati, the mountain-girl, daughter of the Himalaya Mountain, as ‘Uma’, ‘Mother’, ‘Gowri’ – ‘White’ and ‘Sati’ – Virtues’. As Devi which simply means the ‘Goddess’ the spouse of Siva unites the personalities, the ferocious and the sublime. And as Sakthi she is regarded as the motivating energy of the Universe without which even Lord Siva is powerless to act. Paradoxically, it is only Devi, the Goddess, whether beneficent or cruel, who among the goddesses has an independent personality of her own. (150)
Devi, the protagonist of *The Thousand Faces of Night*, is a dreamer and lives in a world of fantasy and numerous tales of avenging goddesses from Hindu Puranas narrated so descriptively by her grandmother in her childhood. Her grandmother’s stories provide an escape route for Devi from the ‘sticky walls’ of her mother’s womb. They taught her to dream, to fly, to tear to shreds the suffocating veils of femaleness. The old women’s myths, fables and fantasies are thus subverted and changed to analytical, rationalist male discourse in her dreams. She Devi frequently dreams of herself as an avenging warrior. “I lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magical demons’ heads” (*TFN* 41). If History is Male, then Myth is female and predates History.

Be it mythological stories of Gandhari, Amba, or Damayanti or real life story like that of Uma, her cousin, Devi’s grandmother was an excellent narrator. In her adolescence Devi had listened to her grandmother’s stories drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with their focus on women’s pride, destiny and self-sacrifice. They were a prelude to her womanhood, an initiation into subterranean possibilities. It made such an impact on her that Devi lived a secret life of her own in which she visualized herself as “a woman warrior, a playing on the Veena, a heroine, a Devi, who rode a tiger and cut off evil, magical demons’ heads” (*TFN* 41). Thus, Devi is brought up with many illusions of womanhood. Apart from Devi the characters who engage the readers’ attention are Sita, by her active presence, Paravatiamma by her ‘absent-presence’ and Mayamma, by her ‘enduring’ presence.

Sita, the middle-aged widow, and mother of Devi, proves to be a cunning counterfeit to the wife of Rama in the ‘Ramayana’. But for the name, she does not resemble the Sita of the ‘Ramayana’ in any detail. Like a talented player of cards setting her eyes on success and
achievement, she manipulates her moves in such a cunning manner that her whole family – her husband, father-in-law, daughter, son-in-law, kith and kin – willing or unwilling, does everything as per her plans and expectations.

Like the blindfold of Gandhari of the Mahabharata, which was a protest and indirect punishment against an injustice imposed on her (by getting her married to the blind king Dhirutashtra), Sita’s denial of Veena and the deep pleasures it brought to her soul, was not a sacrifice, but a furious avenging punishment on herself and her whole family. Sita was a woman who did not complain, a woman who knew how to make sacrifices without fanfare. But what she never realized was that such a pattern set early in relationship congeals into a trap. One could not get out of it without causing pain either to oneself or to others. Hence Sita played on the life of others – (especially her husband and daughter) instead of playing on Veena, which she sacrificed in a moment of untold fury.

Parvatiamma hails from a traditional Hindu Brahmin family. She is married to Baba, the traditional Believer of Religious Puranas, who thinks that the housewife should always be joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic wares, restrained in expenses. Parvatiamma’s suffocated self seeks fresh-air of freedom in the bajans-filled puja room and eventually out of home. While Sita’s choice is one of self-denial, Parvatiamma’s is affirmation of the self. While Sita asserts herself and her role (as wife and mother) through commanding affirmation, Parvatiamma asserts herself by negation of motherhood and wife-hood. Her peculiar spiritual quest and ultimate choice blow up Baba’s attempt to canonize woman by assigning a great deal of responsibilities to her. Hence, to Baba who represents the institutionalized patriarchy and who appears like a gentle Pharaoh in retirement, Parvati’s quest beyond human relations and her search for independent salvation are quite incomprehensible and thoroughly baffling. By her untraditional act,
Parvatiamma has turned Baba’s theories upside down. Theoretically Baba believes that having a virtuous wife guarantees the husband’s spiritual attainment, but practically when his wife (Parvati) leaves home in search of spiritual salvation, he declares, “For a woman who leaves her home in search of God, only death is a home-coming” (TFN 64). Githa Hariharan has indeed made a powerful point and has shown a new side of the ‘Night’ that is, womanhood, in the domestic-exit act of Parvati in order to reach heaven.

Myths and stories are aptly used by Githa Hariharan to contrast the reality of the status of women with that of imagination in the novel. Stories from Indian Epics and women characters like Gandhari, Sita, Parvati, Amba, Damayanthi, provide scaffolding to the main story line. The author relates the relevance of epic stories in contemporary society and thereby links traditional culture with modern reality. Symbols like garden and veena, enrich the underlying philosophy of life, portrayed through characters like Sita. Even the festival Diwali is used significantly. When Devi returns from America to her mother, and when she finally returns home to her mother after leaving Mahesh, her husband, and Gopal, a short – time lover, it is Diwali time. From the darkness of her past life, Devi turns to light – future (Diwali is a festival of lights). Instead of depending on others, which is misery, Devi turns to rest on herself, which is the way to happiness. Realizing that she should not be a neurotic or an aimless fool or a teasing bitch or a mere dreamer, she returns home to begin life anew. The inviting call of Veena that Devi hears on her return suggests renewal of a new, positive relationship between Sita and her daughter and the renewal of life itself. It is a call to deal with a repressed self and buried bitterness. The real music of Veena suggests a conducive climate for Devi to begin her renewal-process. Through the many routes of self-realization, Sita (mother) and Devi (daughter) find the shreds of their identity – their true faces of womanhood. On going to the edge of darkness, they find ray of light (hope) of the future. After having done enough tightrope walking they realize that it is time
they stopped the struggle for balancing themselves within the family and stood erect freely in all their dignity as free woman, without any external support. To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, they would have to start from the very beginning to free the sand-choked roots in the garden of their life.

In a way it is a beginning of a new life for all three women, Mayamma, Sita and Devi, “who walked a tightrope and struggled for some balance; for some means of survival they could fashion for themselves” (TFN 135). If Mayamma had coveted birth, endured life and nursed death, Sita had built a wall of reticence around herself in her struggle for survival which had been far more efficient but its pain, for all its subtlety, had been just as deep, and perhaps less relenting, because at the end, she had to look back on an emptiness unfamiliar to Mayamma. As for Devi, she was fed with fantasies by her grandmother, a secretive love by her father and was pushed into directions and decisions chosen by her mother with much hope and expectation. An ever obedient puppet, Devi mimed the lessons they taught her, whose strings they pulled and tugged (jerked) with love, especially her mother who held the reins invisibly and manoeuvred it skilfully and subtly. She ran away from all her trails, just as she turned a blind eye to her father’s helpless thrashing for a companion, or her mother’s lonely hand stretched out towards her.

The past, the present and the future are represented by Mayamma, Sita and Devi, respectively. Mayamma is the archetypal female who accepted her fate, cursed it but never questioned it and lived her life exactly as she was expected to she bore the brunt of cruelty that society had ordained for a women – as a daughter, a wife, a daughter – in -law, a deserted women and a mother. She had no choice and made no choice but to live a predetermined life. Born about fifteen years later into higher social and economic strata, Sita chooses the tame role of a good daughter-in-law and wife. In order to achieve that to
perfection, she tramples on her music and destroys the artist in her. If she ever suffers the pangs of deprivation or regretted her choice, she never lets the world know it nor does she waste her time on reminiscences of the past. She is projected as the strongest of the three as she knows what she wants and works for that.

However, it is Devi, who is the modern feminist. Though she lacks the will to choose of her early decisions are faltering, a development can be noted in her character. To every woman, survival is of paramount importance. Not succumbing to sorrow or despair, they do not commit suicide like Anita Desai's Protagonists. They prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival.

The character portrayal of Devi provides some interesting and paradoxical points. Devi has a deep and secret longing for the emotional, expressive and purely maternal love from her mother Sita; she appears to be a 'Solid Woman' - Like the Sita of the Ramayana or the Desdemona of the Othello or the Gandhari of the Mahabharatha. Slowly and gradually, Sita emerges as the multi-faceted, dynamic, assertive, independent figure, a 'Liquid Woman' - This transformation is similar to that of Sita of the Ramayana becoming a Draupathi of the Mahabharata. Not succumbing to sorrow of despair, the three main characters of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night prove the strength of their womanhood in their struggle for survival, with a renewed awareness of their identity.

Thus, the linear realistic story of Devi and her desperate search for an identity in the tradition-ridden Hindu society with the "thousand faces" of its continuing "night" culminates with her final decision to take the centre-stage, to strive for "a story of her own" (139). When asked about the part played by women writers in changing the society and the status of women in India, Githa Hariharan replied to Joel Kuorrti thus:
...the real issue we examine over and over again through women's lives....is the continual contesting of Tradition and Modernity... This is not a theme that will ever die this tussle between tradition and modernity seems to me a tussle as perennial as the battle between the senses.... The need for change is of course, something that can come very well through Literature.... (25-26)

And true to her words, Githa Hariharan has given graphic pictures of women belonging to three generations and has skilfully and diligently lifted up the mirror of novel to the tussle between tradition and modernity in the postcolonial Indian Society. Githa Hariharan ferrets out the struggle of Indian women in her affiliation with society and man for the sake of preserving her identity. The sharper relevance of the whole issue thus is on universal suffering of women on the sub continent. She delineates the importance of their sufferings to the great epic periods of the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha because from them Indian women draw their life models.

The postcolonial feminist narratives of Indian women writers have two dominant strains of their principle fabric of ideology. One is the consciousness of subjugation and the other, the transcendent efforts of resistance towards achieving a status of empowerment. As they embark on the subject and construct their narratives, they invariably go to stories and tales from ancient literature. It is the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha that form the Hindu treasure house of tales. But Githa Hariharan however, reaches to the Middle East and exploits the most avidly consumed tale, The Arabian Nights for an enquiry into the subjugation and liberation of women of ancient lands. She is so much overwhelmed by the success of an imaginative and creative woman that she constructs her work of fiction on the woman from the land of Purdha. Her characters, as they attain a shape and individuality,
emerge as true and ideal women representatives of an archetypal creativity, valour and knowledge. The protagonist saves herself and the world of virgin women around her by overpowering the sword with her word. She continues to enjoy the status of power through her adventurous life and wisdom. Githa Hariharan’s narrative in *When Dreams Travel* is a strong assertion of transcendence from culturally and historically conditioned state of subordination. Her success story seems to be a dream that travels through the Patriarchal constraints of woman. In fact she wins by fighting a war with the most powerful man of her times. As the narrative unfolds one finds the disruption and the subversion of the past, the culture and the Patriarchal edifice of woman’s alienation from the centre stage of human life. In other words Shahrzad’s success story emerges as Githa Hariharan’s reinterpretation of history, a meta narrative and man’s tale of the Arabian Nights.

Githa Hariharan’s job is made easy by the choice of the ancient narrative. The same is the case when she chooses to talk about a mother and daughter in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. The Hindu mythological tales and the strong male bias, come as easy stuff for subversion and recreation by the women writers. Githa Hariharan chooses to tell the story of Devi and Sita, the daughter and the mother. She treats all the stories of Hindu Mythology with contempt and the act of subversion begins from the very naming of the characters. Devi, the modern Intellectual woman seeks her enlarged feminist female space, while Sita her mother attempts to construct the ideal stereotype space for her daughter. Githa Hariharan goes on to construct the story as the encounter between benevolent and malevolent images of Hindu goddesses. She prefers to choose the avenging goddesses Durga, Kali and Amba rather than being glorified as a possessor of passive virtues of Gowri, Parvati, Hemavathi and Sakthi. She took the juicy tales and stories about women’s destiny and self sacrifice from her grandmother and she was so much overwhelmed by the warrior woman inside her. While Sita wants to condemn her to a life of wifehood, Devi
wishes to don the role of Kali crouched on a tiger chopping the heads of magical demons. Devi thinks of herself like the Hindu goddess Durga, a manifestation of spiritual and moral power, ready to overcome, even Shiva, God of Destruction.

Interestingly Mahesh, Devi’s husband is named after Shiva who attempts to destroy her very spirit. Naturally when she chooses to elope with Gopal, she reaches the peak of her romantic travel. In this context, the Hindu mythological characters help Githa Hariharan to state her argument of emancipation and sublimation into a symbol of power, a ‘Sakthi’. As she rewrites the myth of Arabian Nights, she goes one step further; she weaves her own fabric of myth in which woman is given a dominant role - the saviour and the killer - as is revealed in the Part Two of *When Dreams Travel*. She re-interprets the myths with her own allegorical tales, drawing her resources from the binaries of sex, power, polities and human psyche. In one respect, one can even state that Githa Hariharan moves from Narrative fiction to a new genre of ‘Report Literature’, a form now popular in China. The foregoing discussion asserts and confirms the argument of this researcher, that Githa Hariharan’s message of deliverance is defiance and resistance. She recommends mobility from passivity to activity for the empowerment of women. This is what she finds as she re-reads and subverts the myths of India and Persia and the Hindu mythological tales. Hence, both the texts considered here proclaim a message from the writer that passivity is not the life of woman.
Chapter II

Notes and References

Books and Nonperiodical Publications


**Articles and Other Publications in Periodicals, and Electronic Sources**


