When Dreams Travel: A Blurring Reality

The novel When Dreams Travel exhibits women's issues from feminine perspective with the help of recreated mythic and dreamy environment. It is primarily quest of woman for her identity which is dealt with unique approach and manner. Rama Kundu also observed: 'When Dreams Travel is also about a woman's search for "her" story. But what seems to have undergone sea change is the author's treatment of the subject. Here the author attempts to write a metafiction through an elaborate intertext that is made to foreground the feminist issue from a fresh perspective.' (179)

The main concerning aspects of the novel seems the power of storytelling, dreams, distinct recreated mythic atmosphere and misery and assertion of female characters. The novel could be studied at any of the levels. Rama Kundu writes:

'Seen from the angle of modern fiction theory this double fiction appears to be a story about storytelling. With the purpose to suggest the ulterior triumph of art over life, of imagination over mundane and cruel reality, or the ennobling effect of art even on an insensitive/insensitized mind, and of course the possibility of art as a liberating device for a woman imprisoned in the "dungeon" of patriarchal norms.' (Kundu, 180)

When Dreams Travel depicts the suffering of women in the mythical background. It illustrates how the women are tormented and what the consequences are when they are exploited by the society which is male-dominating. Like, the Thousand Faces of Night the novel portrays the marginalized status of women but the approach of the novelist is totally different from that. Retelling of myths from women's point of view and the protest of the sufferer is the central idea of The Thousand Faces of Night whereas narrative technique, mythical environment is created and handled intelligently by the women characters in When Dreams Travel.

Storytelling is a long back tradition in India. It has been practiced since ancient time. It has been used to transfer knowledge generation to generation when print and
electronic media did not exist. By the time it performed varied functions. The novel sets storytelling as the tradition of women which is passed from generation to generation. Their sufferings, anguishes, pain and wishes find expression through it. It works as a life-jacket for Shahrzad who rescued herself and other women by it. The aim or objective of storytelling is serious, thrilling, and exciting. Dipte Radhyshyam also notes, 'Overyears, Shahrzad, the narrator of The Thousands and One Nights, had emerged to be the archtype for a storyteller, who could feel the curiosity of the listener, keep him in suspense, and thus holds him in thrill under the charm of her magic.' (178) Stories become so fascinating and mesmerizing that Shahryar forgets his routine but evil task i.e. to assault a woman and then kill her ruthlessly. Storytelling enables herself to capture the attention of the king and turn the situation upside down.

The storytelling plays vital role in the novel and reconstruct past of the female characters. Rama Kundu (When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse) observed: 'They reconstruct their individual past, the terror and sadness, the moments of daring and the subsequent banality, through absurd and often horrible tales, funny yet painful tales of magic realism.' (70) The storytellers reveal their painful and horrific past. Parashkevova thinks that the storytellers in the novel carry the burden of the inheritance of the Nights and endure the weight of his memory. The power of storytelling is also evident in A River Sutra, The Ghost of Vasu Master and The Thousand Faces of Night but the purpose and need of storytelling is altogether different in When Dreams Travel.

Shahrzad tells stories so that she could make Shahryar numb. She wanted to freeze him and make him unable to act so that she could save her and other women to sacrifice: ‘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’ (7) It is the power of storytelling that Shahrzad is able to hold all three people around her: ‘This self-absorbed scene lives on, shamelessly immortal. It unfolds itself every night for a thousand and one nights.' (7) A satisfactory ending is achieved with enchanting stories, and Shahryar is brought to his senses, and restored to his earlier image (the noble status). Rama Kundu also wrote in this regard:
'Shahrzad's act of storytelling itself is seen as a desperate struggle of the imprisoned genius to channelize its creativity, to achieve a feminine acriture; though in the original the stories, supposedly told by her do not carry the mark of the WL or the feminine ecriture; rather they often smack of obscene and rude male chauvinism, and understandably so, since these were actually told/written by male orators in an orthodox culture context which necessarily banished the women indoors.' (69)

Shahrzad's plan to tell Shahryar various stories of Bulukiya becomes successful. It shows the enchanting and magical powers of storytelling. The enthralling stories assure both the sisters that the night will pass in telling stories, and Shahryar will not seduce her. The adventurous stories of Bulukiya are filled with surprise, horror and strangeness which are sufficient to hold him intact:

'She (Shahrzad) sees Bulukiya through his search for the herb of immortality; confronts serpents as big as camels; sees strange islands, hears trees laugh, discovers other heavy with clutches of human heads and birds on their branches. On Bulukiya's shoulders, she has an audience with the king of the jinn and hears about the innumerable hells of Allah. In Jahannam only the least of these, there are a thousand mountains there are seventy thousand cities of fire, in each city, seventy thousand castles of fire, in each castle, seventy thousand houses of fire, in each house seventy thousand couches of fire, and on each couch seventy thousand manners of torment.' (128)

It is the keen power of story-telling of Shahrzad that she mesmerizes Shahryar and saves the city. The power of storytelling is elaborated in The Ghost of Vasu Master in which Mani is enchanted by Vasu's stories of Panchatantra.
Dilshad unfolds various stories to Dunyazad and enriches her knowledge with the past of Shahrzad. Similarly, enlightenment is also attained by Vasu Master through his own stories which he tells to Mani. The stories of Dunyazad make aware of women issues. The story of a youngman and a Sulaiman is one such story told by Dilshad which reveals how much passionate Shahrzad was in listening about others' stories of travelling. Stories build a certain bond of affection between Dilshad and Dunyazad. They share their attitudes, perception, experiences and expectations. Neelam Sanwal Bhardwaj also stated, 'Breaking the accepted norms of heterosexual relationship, Dunyazad takes the slave girl Dilshad as her lover. She finds herself liberated in the company of another woman instead of searching for a heterosexual option for her bodily loneliness.' (2)

Story-telling has been effective in the life of all the characters. They fulfill a certain purpose in their life. Shahrzad could save herself by telling stories to Shahryar; Dunyazad and Dilshad share stories to each other in search of Shahrzad. They expect that Shahrzad might respond to their untold stories: 'Will these storytellers 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?' (118) It also appears in different novels. It enriches the life of characters (especially narrator) In A River Sutra; in The Thousand Faces of Night it reflects the feminine sensibility and cultural tendency; in The Ghost of Vasu Master it heals a little child.

Storytelling is fresh in the sense that the storytellers add their own synthesis and perspective in their stories. Even if the characters tell the mythical stories, they add their own knowledge and experiences into them. The story, thus, becomes their unique creation/recreation. Shahrzad's stories are interesting as it has the fresh appeal and creativity of the storyteller: 'The synthesis will be hers, and in that sense, the authorship.' (133) Not only Shahryar but readers are also enchanted and thrilled by the stories created by Shahrzad. It is the same infatuation we feel in the Thousand Faces of the Night. Rama Kundu is of the view: 'Shahrzad has fascinated not only her tyrant husband but also held readers under her spell of story-telling across lands and ages.' (181) Women’s desire to tell the stories is displayed in women characters in the novel.
Seema Dutta also notes the storytelling as a consolation for these women: 'The three women present the three routes via which modern woman can regain her identity: by trickling patriarchy a survival tactic; by overcoming patriarchy, through force as a retaliatory tactic: and by writing 'her-stories' as a subversive tactic, instead of playing a silent role in history.' (134)

Their stories are not mere entertaining stories but are their own creations having profound meaning related to life. A girl in Dunyazad’s dream invites her to share stories: ‘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 remembering us to posterity. Dunyazad, will you travel with me?’ (107) The stories of Dunyazad and Dilshad which they tell for seven nights and days tell not only their own minds but also the desires and thoughts of two dead or lost women as well. Two women, one possesses by a missing storyteller, the other by a muted poet. Two women, one possessed by a missing storyteller, the other by a muted poet. Two women and their goading jinn wander the infinite wilderness of stories.’ (115)

It is noticeable that when Dunyazad and Dilshad share their stories they enjoy a certain kind of freedom from bondage and restriction. They create their own world of their own choice. They are free from the male-domination and the shackles of the society. ‘There is no sultan in the room to listen to them or to chop off their heads, so they can dispense with the grand-scale infinity of a thousand nights.’ (118) Their storytelling binds them with an unflinching support and trust for each other as happens with Devi and her father-in-law. The power of storytelling lies in this fact that it may influence people to act in a certain manner. It is power of storytelling which holds Shahryar and saves Shahrzad. The same could be traced in The Ghost of Vasu Master when Mani is encouraged and motivated indirectly to come back to the world he belongs to. Devi’s protest also is the outcome of the influence she had from her grandmother’s stories. Radheshyam also pointed out:

'Over years, Shahrzad, the narrator of The 1001 Nights, had emerged to be the archetypal for a storyteller, who
could feel the curiosity of the listener, keeps him in suspense, and thus holds him in thrill under the charm of her magic.' (178)

Shahryar's rigid rules and terror are abolished by the storytelling of Shahrzad. In Dilshad's story, Brother Donkey and Brother Monkey are also influenced by their own story of Azhar and Mazhar who create controversy and quarrel between the two brothers. 'There was a grim silence before the two came to blows. This sudden change of mood was so unexpected that Dilshad peeped around the tree trunk to see if she could help.' (166)

It is the manner of storytelling of the old woman and the old man that their inner minds and perceptions are revealed. In the mythic story told by the old woman the character of Rupvati is at the centre of the story who sacrifices her life for the welfare of the other people (the beggar woman). It is the woman who sacrifices pleasantly. Where the story of the old man begins with Rupvata, a male who plays the central role and his virtues are highlighted. The sacrifice of her wife Rupvati is secondary to him. The story of Dilshad shows glaring contrast in the opinions of the man and woman. The story of Satyasama also gives women equal status to men.

The story-telling reveals the feminine sensibility of the women who are self-driven and are forced only by their own spirit. The stories of Devi's grandmother are also the reflection of feminine attitude towards mythic stories. For instance, Nanni is the woman who rejects to follow the evil intentions of the minister. She acts according to her own wish and tendency. Hariharan gives full scope and free space to the women characters Dilshad and Shahrzad to create their own desired environment where they could develop the intense and self-willed women which are rare to find in the real life. The priority of men and women differ. Women may sacrifice their life for their chastity or truthfulness but men showed his valour and bravery in suppressing and using women. It is observed in The Martyr's Walk.

In the story Three Scenes and a Father, Dunyazad focuses on the condition of women in the patriarchal society. It reveals the trouble of a father and male-
domination. The story told by Dunyazad reveals how a woman is puppet in the hands of male--first of her father and then her husband. The wazir, Dunyazad's father is adrift in the desert and he is denied entering into a pool as his deeds are not accomplished. The pool mocks at him saying, '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?'

She describes the dilemma of her father, severe sacrifice of her sister Shahrzad and thus explores the reality of our society without hiding or concealing any brutal fact. Hariharan's stories are vague and suggestive and a prominent feature of postmodern writings. They are directed by ambiguity making the stories complex. Dilshad is also unable to tell the real significance of Shahrzad's words, 'I find it strangely comforting to hear of others' travels' (77) and leaves Dunyazad to introspect and interpret its meaning. She tells: 'I do not know how to finish stories. You finish it, you are the malika, I am only a slave.' (77)

Women suffer immensely in the novel. Shahryar reduces women to mere commodity. The heinous and cruel realistic picture of the society is portrayed. Shahryar wants a virgin every night to have sexual intercourse with and then discard her by slitting her throat and cut her body into several pieces. It is the particular series of event taking place in Shahabad everyday through which subjugated image of woman is revealed. Shahrzad's life is the representative of several several Indian women in general. They are forced to sacrifice and are burdened by such heinous and ugly fate. Shahrzad, the saviour of the city, is fed up with her tight-packed schedule of amusing Shahryar with story-telling and physical union.

The tyranny of the sultan is not particular of Shahabad rather it represents the rude and cruel treatment of male prevalent in every age-- from past to modern era. The novel begins with miserable, pitiable and complex state of women through Dunyazad and Shahrzad. Ages, background and setting change, but women's status remains unchanged and undoubtedly unsatisfactory. Jaya, Devi, Mangala and Bala all are equally distressed and desolated from patriarchal modes of society. When Shahrzad is with Shahryar ‘he is staring at Shahrzad as if ready to devour her.’ (6) The scene depicts us a realistic but heinous series of women’s suppression in a state when a
sultan sexually harasses a virgin daily and his brother Shahzaman kills the woman when she is used up by the sultan. The situation is more pitiable as we come to know Dunyazad, sister of Shahrzad ‘waiting for her cue to ask a question, or exclaim piously, or gasp, or groan or sigh at the right times.’ (5) Shahrzad through her story-telling holds the scene and prohibits Shahryar to exploit her sexually, gets her killed and then do the same with Dunyazad, her sister. She is given power and ability to use it without being frightened.

In order to save herself and all other women from the cruel clutches of the sultana she creates a wonderful world of those endless stories which continues for thousand nights. In this novel, Dunyazad’s story is Shahrzad is carried with a well-known myth of sacrificing an animal like goat to please God. Shahrzad's callousness and brutality is carried when he is shown as devoid of any expression of love or emotions. Rama Kundu (in When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse) remarks in this regard: 'The husbands themselves could take countless women--wife or slave--according to their whim or pleasure; but that was, of course, a right taken for granted, not to be questioned. Githa Hariharan makes an ironic use of this very premise.'(63) Shahryar is hungry god who desires Wazir to sacrifice his own daughter, Shahrzad for him. Here Shahrzad is an innocent goat and Shahryar a cruel god. The Wazir’s dilemma is heightened as he wants neither to sacrifice his daughter nor displease his sultan by disobeying him. But still he sacrifices his daughter and she is also ready to sacrifice herself to save her father from any trouble. She is confident enough to handle the situation to end this drama forever.

Though the Wazir is pitiable in his own sense as it is his cruel duty that even after being father of two young virgin daughters he has to find out a girl and present before Shahryar every night. He is unwilling to perform his duty but still he has to. The self-consciousness of the Wazir makes him feel as if he is forced at once in a pool where the bodies of women are cut and stripped off float ‘…wardrobe of exclusively female discards. A whole population of dismembered bodily parts, pickled in a viscous fluid, are floating around the wazir; a long snake-haired, purple-throated head,
a hairless thigh, a lone breast with a hideously engorged nipple. All the women of Shahabad seem to be represented in this hellish oasis.’ (171)

The sultan could be satisfied and fed up only by the beloved of the wazir—Shahrzad. He asserts to the wazir ‘Remember, only something you love will fill my stomach with your devotion.’ (175) On the one hand, there is cruelty of the tormenting sultan and on the other is the meek sacrifice of the wazir and especially of Shahrzad who is keen to be sacrificed spontaneously. It truly represents how meek and tender women are to sacrifice themselves against the hunger, pride and ego. ‘To the lord’s amazement and delight, she then turns back to the wazir and stretches her neck to make his task easier...The goat bleats joyfully as her head falls to the ground. In the silence that follows, the wazir builds a fire, begins his task of cooking.’ (175)

The story also reveals that once the torments are accepted and tolerated it extends and asks for something more cruel and brutal. If a torment is meekly accepted it gives way to the other. Once the wazir is ready to sacrifice his own daughter the cruelty of sultana is that he invited the wazir to join him during the meal to eat her flesh: ‘The wazir is anxiously waiting for permission to serve the meal. But there is another detail; his god does not want to eat alone. ‘Eat with me, he commands.’(175) Even the obedient wazir who satisfied the king's demand so far sudders in terror and thinks as ‘irrational demand of this relentless god.’ (176)

But the cruel reality is that the sacrifice of Shahrzad is not acknowledged and appreciated by the society. Shahrzad's sacrifice created so much fear inside mind of common people ‘that not one family in the city would admit to harbouring a virgin daughter any longer. The king wanted a virgin every night.’ (269) Shahrzad represents those women who sacrifice but it is sad reality of the world that Sharzad's sacrifices is not understood properly by the people for whom she suffered and dared. Her decision is blotted as bad conscience or by saying. ‘Only a witch can stay awake like that...Night after night after night.’ (272) Shahryar remembers her only for her chastity, not for her creative talent by which she overcame a distressing situation. Rama Kundu remarks: 'Shahryar praises her (Shahrzad) only for her chastity--a
patriarchal value imposed exclusively on women--and not for her creative talent.' (191)

Women were materialistic possession to royal people who could use them like breathless jewels as per their own choices. Kings have different collections—money, jewels, gems and many other such things. Shahabad’s king also collected women—‘a prize collection of jawari, a private collection of slavegirls.’ (90) Shahrzad’s desire to be martyr and to be free from all the shackles of the society shows her bravery as well as double standard of the society she lives in. The palace is like a prison in which she is suppressed by the sultan. It is noticeable that Shahryar is not as much wounded by the imprisonment of Umar as by Shahrzad’s escape.

Shahrzad listens the consoling words only from her father, Wazir. He recognizes her task as imperative which she continued for the thousand and one nights saving the life of other women of her city. He says, ‘…you are a living legend. Your wit will live on, longer than any of your children or grandchildren. I see your name, Shahrzad, like a vine that creeps forward inch by inch, growing from one millennium to another.’ (273) Shahrzad risked her life to save herself and all other women feels. But when she becomes old, and should be regarded for the supreme sacrifice which she made, her agony and distress can be seen when she says, ‘I, Shahrzad, saved your grandmothers from being beheaded. I saved them, and so your mothers and you. You would not be here if I had not done it!’ (275) Hariharan revises the text and reveals the feminine issues and opposes strict patriarchal rules. Rama Kundu (in When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse) also observes: ‘The extreme form of patriarchal oppression that was implied in the original tale, but was not criticized or questioned there, has been openly interrogated and exposed by the author of When Dreams Travel.’ (63)

Later Shahryar is imprisoned by his own son, and Shahrzad who is now sultana becomes quite dominating and assertive. She was ‘conferred the title of sultana on her.’, ‘coins were minted with her name, frequent edicts from the harem issued.’ (159) But the sad reality is that the Indian patriarchal mode suppresses the women and never extends the position and power even to the fittest and most justified women. They
attain some satisfactory situation only by the strong will power and intelligence. Shahryar also finds himself dejected when power is handed to Shahrzad. His ego does not allow confessing generously what he did wrong. Shahryar, though felt at last that he was wrong in his deeds, but still didn’t ask for forgiveness. He flaunted his generous nature when 'granted a magnanimous pardon to Shahrzad, allowed her to live, to love and be loved, to be feted as the saviour of the city?’ (158) In the novel not only Shahrzad is a sacrificed and daring woman, but also Dunyazad is. With the help of different imaginary characters of stories Hariharan tries to enrich her novel by exploring the same suppressed status of varied women. The story of Dilshad also reveals the pathetic condition of women and the ill-treatment they receive. Hariharan depicts the mind of Dilshad who is aware of the torments given by male to a female.

The old lady is forced to listen him and correct her story while the story of both is based on a myth about Buddha-to-be. Both could be equally right or wrong. But she is not allowed to assert herself as it is the power of man. For him, only his interpretations are correct, could exist and should be popularized. He is of the opinion that his wife polluted the myth by communicating wrong to Satyasama. It is also interesting to note that when the old man finishes his story as correction of the old woman’s story there is no quarrel again over the issue—who is correct and whose myth/story is incorrect and non-acceptable. Such male domination is prevalent in other novels as well where many times women have subordinated role. Equally discarded is Satyasama when she distorts facts and plot of the story, and reframes it according to her own perception and thinking. This time both the old woman and the old man throw her outside their home saying: ‘Lying romantic!’ spat the woman. The broom whisked and waved at Satyasama as if she was a cockroach. ‘Dangerous!’ spluttered the man, now that he had laid hands on his stick.’

In telling a single story free from male-domination and condition puts Satyasama into trouble by expelling cruelly; all her devotion is forgotten. Her all devotion and meek manner of doing their household work is forgotten. It represents how, if thinks on her own, a woman is tormented and exiled if she acts something which is not in accordance with the acceptance of male-dominated society. 'She
Satyasama obstinately stays alive with her moaning, the only language now available to her, continues to perform some sort of resistance.’ (Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, 133) Satyasama’s act of doing domestic work meekly symbolizes all the devotion women work within the society and are still an object only to follow what man say and do.

The suffering and agony is intertwined with the character and stories told by either Dilshad or Dunyazad as well. Dunyazad tells something concealed and hidden in her story The Slavegirl’s Palace about Dilshad. Her agony is suppressed under her duties for Shahryar and his palace. Dunyazad imagines herself and Shahryar in the embrace of each other and this makes her ashamed as she reminds her stepson and her father, the wazir. She listens the voice which rings: ‘This is grief, life and death, no drama concocted for an idle woman’s entertainment!’ (44) Hariharan represents the pitiable condition of women in the framework of the setting of the Arabian Nights. Shahrzad and her spirit are felt by other women also as the imagination moves ahead. Shahrzad becomes ‘a shape-shifting woman, a woman with many names.’ (25)

Sabiha, a nursemaid of the palace of Samarkand is one of the women who are paid as per their work for a certain period only. Her status is not recognized and worth considerable in the society she lives in. The grief and pain is profound as she remembers the memories of her working period. Women’s issues are described with the feministic view—a woman who tolerates much in the society and hides her anguish and pain under her ironic smile which conceals not only her real condition but also the behaviour of the society and callousness to her. Women try to hide and conceal their suffering and misery. They continue it which results into endless suffering for them. Dilshad’s reply that a mark near her lips was a gift when Dunyazad asks her let us know how modestly she remains secret of her heart a secret.

Satyasama, a woman in the story told by Dilshad to Dunyazad, also suffered much in her life. Her verse, a little too truthful for some tastes, offended the ruler of her city. He summoned his hangman and the noose was slipped round her neck and tightened.’ (91) Though the hangman represents the men who are sensible towards women and the world less troublesome for them. He smuggled her into a merchant’s
boat which traveled high seas and she came to Shahabad by which her life moved on
to the path of trouble ahead. If the world is not favourable for the women like
Dunyaazad and Shahrzad how it could be suitable for the deformed women like
Satyasama. Satyasama, called one-Eye Monkey-Woman later, was thrown out by her
parents due to her extreme strange and animal-like physical features. One-Eye is not
seen as miserable and pitiable rather it is her parents who are considered as pitiable in
the eye of the society. When Satyasama is got out from her family by her parents they
are not to blame. ‘These rumour-mongers insist that the parents are to be pitied, not
blamed.’ (136) For the abandoned Satyasama the only abandoned freakish peepal tree
was home as it was ignored by all.

The character of One-Eye peeps into the life of innumerable women who are
doomed to have troubles and mental sickness. The sense of lose stuck with her life
forever. Earlier she lost her parents and after that her very gender and name were
about to lose. One-Eye who captured the attention of Eternals, both Easties and
Westies by her melodious voice, could not attain the status of a common person as all
others had. Her attention-getting voice could earn only attraction for her voice. It is
worth significant to note how women respond generously and sensibly with having
feeling of human welfare even after they are dejected and discarded. While the
dwellers of Eternal City are divided into Easties and the Westies as they have
controversy within them. One-Eye seems free from all such narrow-mindedness. It is
quite symbolic. She still worked for the welfare of the both—Easties and Westies.

One-Eye represents the voice and status of woman who is suppressed not to
speak, and when she speaks she is given punitive punishment. ‘Goaded by her
unreasonable refusal, her tormentors locked her up in an underground chamber with
just enough air to keep her alive.’ (147) The character of One-Eye designed by
Hariharan is not of meek women only, rather she could assert, give voice to her
decisions and execute them within the limited space she captures for herself. She is
alive even after her death through her shrilled voice—her existence and her
importance will remain same till her voice exists.
He is grieved because he could not rule over Shahrzad. He says: ‘How could I not rule over her? How could I not rule? How could I not join myself to her if it meant my salvation?’ (104) Shahzaman is also limited to confine her wife in four walls. He wants her to live in harem. When Dunyazad requests him not to rule the city with hard and rigid regulations, he scorns: ‘Do you know the way to the harem. And if you do, why not stay there?’ (195) She is not assigned any work related to the management of the city: ‘What business does she have but to care for the one imbecile son she has given him?’ (195) She is an efficient competent but yet remains powerless: ‘There is a woman who is watching him from a window, a quiet, ingenious woman who can rule, though her power will always be circumscribed by her invisibility.’ (198) Shahryar is shocked at how Shahrzad could escape when he loves her following feminine attributes. She must accept and respect if tribute is paid to her by her husband. Shahryar asserts: ‘The tomb is her because it holds my memories of her; my grief and now my wasting body. The mausoleum, the paradise around it, my obsession, all are my tribute to Shahrzad. But she escapes me.’ (104-5)

Satyasama is betrayed by Prince Atbiq as he made fake love with her to get only her secret of story-telling. The people of Donkey-Village tried to steal the secret power of Satyasama and to destroy it. ‘Their handsome young hero, Prince Atbiq, was unanimously chosen to carry out the plot.’ (264) The love which should be pure and unadulterated from selfishness and deceit is used as a tool by them to deceive her ‘They loved each other to deceive her ‘They loved each other and lovers don’t have secrets from each other, do they?’ (264) But the secrets of Satyasama are not revealed. It is symbolically presented in Atbiq’s condition when he is puzzled by her envelop containing secret of her power. ‘He reads it out, and he reads, they all grew more and more puzzled.’ (265)

A woman is dominated by her father, husband and son. Dunyazad is dominated by her son. She tries to maintain a balance between her wishes and domination. She comes to Shahabad secretly so that he might not be offended. ‘Her unbending stepson, the ruler of Samarkand, will be displeased when he discovers that she who groomed him for the throne has made this unsanctioned journey to Shahabad.’ (40)
Though the world leaves no choice before women rather than to be martyr, women desire to live and survive even in disastrous circumstances. 'The test thus constructs femininity within parameters of sacrifice and, in addition, insists that the only self-authorizing action available for women is martyrdom.' (Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia 135) In a hostile environment for women, Shahrzad is given a voice of assertion and protest. Ghosh Mohua also points it out in When Dreams Travel: Writing Back to The Arabian Nights: 'But Hariharan makes Shahrzad emerge as the epitome of conscious feminist effort for survival in a society, which is hostile to, and annihilating for women.' (124)

Both the novelists wrote not only to depict problems and difficulties of women rather their female characters could fight against circumstances, try to overcome and succeed in that. They all attempt their protest and assert their will whether she is Jaya, Devi, Sita, Shahrzad or Dunyazad. Through the story told by Dunyazad to Dilshad we come across the profound desire of Dunyazad to survive and live even after troublesome circumstances. Seema Dutta is of the opinion: ‘She (Githa Hariharan) invests her characters with the power and possibilities of resistance and reveals the breaking down of hegemony through various actions and interactions.’ (130)

Hariharan explores women’s desire, and finds that they could not be suppressed wholly even if tried by men. The experience of the merchant and Farid depicts how desirous women are and their desire also needs to be satiated. In the treatment of merchant and more especially in the Brahmin-magician the oppression of women by men is evident which is prevalent in society. The Brahmin-magician tells himself how he suppressed his wife by his magic so that her chastity could be used by him only. The women are reduced only to the useful things for men. They are reduced to mere commodities, not the real persons of flesh and blood: ‘I would spit up the seed every night, release her, and take her to my bed in her normal size.’ (191)

The love of the Brahmin-magician is only to make physical relations with her, satiate his own desire at night and to save her from being polluted. Her desire and wishes does not matter for him. But Hariharan’s female characters are not the puppets in the hands of men; they could react, respond, fulfill their wishes and even deceive
men in their own shrewd and certain manner. The wife of Brahmin-magician also fulfils her wish to love someone by learning her husband’s tools. The magic by which she is suppressed and enclosed into his stomach becomes a useful tool also to deceive him and make a secret love. Hariharan also portrays how easily men’s domination, four-wall enclosure and rude love-making are acceptable in the society but the betrayal of women and love-making to satisfy them is beyond any tolerance.

The jinni- woman in Dunyazad’s story is the lustful woman who attracts to seduce both Shahryar and Shahzaman, and collected their rings as a symbol of the conquest of a woman over men. ’Holding the purse between her teeth, she adds Shahryar’s glittering ring, proof of her conquest, to the other ninety-eight on her string. Shahzaman’s ring is the hundredth.’ (194) The sultan Shahzaman is wounded by the seduction more severely became it was is given by a woman inferior to male. Hariharan lets her women assert their desires and fulfill wishes in spite of innumerable hurdles and obstacles set by men. Dilshad is able to resist and oppose situation or people by setting out and executing her own wishes.

The women usually possess simple wishes and desires but sometimes they are embroiled in the conspiracy of men. Nanni is a pure woman who desires a happy life with her wealthy prince. But the minister embroils her into the plot of killing a king for his own benefit. She is given illusion of a very happy and joyous life. In the name of beautification she is turned into a Poison-Skin. But when she comes to know the scheme of the king, she takes a bold step by making his plot unsuccessful. She not only steps back in love making with the prince but also keeps a vow and follows it till her life. Her vow asserts her chastity of thoughts and spirit. She declares: 'No man should touch me till the day I die. Though I long for love as much as you do, I must take a vow of chastity forever.’ (206) The woman in the story is not free from the force, but she could resist when she is forced into the deceitful task. Her decisions were her own. She needs nothing but demands on asking, 'but find me some ugly old clothes and an empty little house so I can hide myself.'

Dilshad is contented in a manner that she would be able to write her own inscriptions according to her choice. The power is transferred to women. ‘Now she
(Dilshad) can write an inscription of her own, confound those smooth tongued couplets gracing the palace’s wall and arches.’ (240) The desire of Dilshad is not to achieve materialistic things or power as reward. She wants to get volumes of Shahrzad’s stories—‘that Dilshad is to receive her reward for taking on one sultan, helping to crown another.’ (141) When Dilshad is ‘free from slavery, blessed with books of gold’ (241) she wants to liberte all women from suppression. She aims to end the cruel use of Dungeon away from the palace. When calm and quite pervades, she observed: ‘No, the battle is not yet over. This soiled Dungeon, the bedrock of the palace’s muscular immortality, is what she must tear apart.’ (245)

Hariharan’s characters are restricted and doomed to decay or suffer by society or even by the close relatives. Lonely voice in Dilshad’s story is also restricted by her brother as he always spies on her. When she sings, the very voice declares how severely she is tortured and forced. Though Dilshad could not get meaning of the song, the very melody makes her feel something troublesome and fishy. ‘Dilshad did not understand a word of the singing voice, seemed to be a desperate message from, a prisoner pleading for help.’ (247) Hariharan portrays through the stories how women are restricted and tormented to act in the designed manner set by men. Lonely voice is threatened:

‘In a little while he will be there at his usual hiding post behind that screen, spying on me. That’s all he does every day after sundown. I do not know what he expects to see when I am locked in here alone.’ (248)

Dunyazad’s desire for self-assertion is revealed in her last story The Dreams of Good Women. In the story she craves for her identity different from her sister Shahrzad. Her father’s decision to send her to Shahryar to be martyr is unfair to her. She wanted to assert her own wishes but finds it difficult. She adds ‘I love my sister but I do not want to be her shadow.’ (256) The last words of Shahrzad are not only against the particular tyrant sultana Shahryar but against all dominating males who try to suppress female by their power and glory. The words of Shahrzad are not only a question but also a message that every woman could fight against and oppose male-
domination like she did. The hurdles may be different, situations may vary but the innermost suppression will be the same. It should be protested whenever it occurs. She says, ‘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 word blunted with age, the rusty axe, wake up to be freshly sharpened?’ (276)

Dunyazad is firm, strong and devoted to her desire and goal. She asserts her decision in searching her sister. She says, ‘I must go. Nothing can change that, I know.’ (51) She knows how to use her experience in dealing with the society: ‘Surely her two intimate experiences of men, her spectator’s view of Shahryar’s grand-scale tyranny, love and redemption, and the quick, furtive, mercifully brief coupling with Shahzaman, have taught her something?’ Satyasama or Shahrzad find their own way to react or survive which exhibit their assertion against the male-centered society.

Biscaia also wrote:

'It seems that women either invest in a communicative alternative of their own, like Satyasama, and are subsequently silenced or alienated, or they try to deconstruct male language from the inside, like Shahrzad, and are made martyrs or imprisoned. Either way, it seems the outcome does not differ substantially.' (136)

The desire for sex is quite normal and should be accepted. The novel deals with the innate desire of sex in women. The display of the sexual urge is considered a taboo in the society but Shahryar’s wife and the fresh-faced girl both fulfil their sexual desire which are not accepted in the society. They are considered as socially unfair means. Shahryar’s wife is indulged in sexual act with her male-slave when Shahryar is out of the city for hunting. But women are denied to fulfil their desire. It becomes unacceptable in the society. The sexual appetite is revealed in the fresh-faced girl possessed by Jinni illustrates. Hariharan approves the fulfillment of natural biological urges. Bodily needs are essential to be fulfilled. Sexual urge exists even when Shahrzad is busy in telling stories to Shahryar: ‘The nights of tale-telling have not in any way diminished the rights of bodily matters. If anything, the body has been
supreme.’ (123) Satyasama is also attracted towards sultan and eunuch. Biscaia also notes:

‘… Satyasama's attractiveness both for the sultan and for the eunuch is invested with a sexual undertone which remains underdeveloped in the novel. Even so, there is a clear suggestion of lesbian love in the encounter with the unnamed rani. Satyasama thus might be read as a double freak: a corporeal one and a social or cultural one, with an unconventional sexual orientation that combines involuntary and wily freakishness.’ (130)

The novelist shows different aspects of male-domination and its protest. Raziya, the mother Dunyazad and Shahrzad, is the woman who was treated as a subordinate to her husband. She has to surrender and follow the instructions of her husband. The meaning of her name is 'to agree'. Her name is symbolic of her destiny. ‘True to her name—Raziya, the woman who is agreeable—if she had reservations about her children being offered up for the sacrifice, no one heard about it. Except the wazir perhaps and he was adept at reducing voices, especially those raised in protest, to a complicitous silence.’ (83) She has to accept her fate and her tyrant husband. She could not do anything but see the society tormenting women. She became pale when saw her daughters going to Sultan as brides and then to be killed. She had a look on her face which was ‘not just of grief, anger or hopelessness; but a look which belonged on the face of death.’ (83)

Sharzad’s imagination and her power of dreams are significant and surprise Shahryar. The suppressed desire and expectation of her liberal space finds expression when she claims that she also has desire and right to rule, travel or at least to dream. The eloquent replies are occurred from her stating ‘I don’t have a sword, so it seems I can not rule. I cannot rule, I can not travel, I don’t care to weep. But I can dream.’ (20) Their dreams are complex to understand. The complicated dreams suit with the complex life of women. They are ‘just a rubbishy pile of rough, uncut stones’ and ‘only those locked up in hovels and Dungeons and palaces can see and hear these
dreams.’ (20) The dreams usually are in fragments, and monologues. Mohua Ghosh also states in Feminist Interrogation of a Patriarchal Text: Intertextual Echoes and Departures, 'When Dreams Travel deals with non-realistic tales with no linear narration. Rather the stories are like logicless dreams traveling in a circuitour mode, interpolated and fragmented like, interior monologue.' (138)

Dreams and imagination rule the novel as it reveals the hidden expectations, desires, agony and powers of women. They are indeed powerful. The stories told by Shahrzad to Shahryar to keep him engaged are also based on her own dreams and imagination. It is imagination which holds attention firmly. Shahryar and he become static, away from movement and brutality. ‘In this abnormal climate where imagination through the medium of the word—asserts its power over the blood shedding sword, everyone forgives everyone.’ (21) The power of dreams is felt by Dunyazad claiming that even ‘the powerless must have a dream or two, dreams that break walls, dreams that go through walls as if they are powerless.’ (25)

The dreams and imagination knows no restrictions and bounds as they travel beyond the borders of the country. They move ‘from India to Persia to Arabia to France to England and back to India.’ (25) They run parallel with the acute reality. Sometimes it exhibits reality and anticipate future as well. Dunyazad, who comes to Shahabad in search of her sister, sees a dream at night that she is going down into the tunnel. Dunyazad’s firm decision to search her sister is represented in her dream. Her search for her sister is a difficult task. The dark tunnel is the representative of it: ‘It is so dark that she is unable to say whether the steps lead up or down.’ (45) The hurdles could be removed if they are protested firmly: ‘She moves backs a step, gathers all her panting strength, fall against the door. It gives way with a terrible clanging protest.’ (46) Finding out the truth and goal is not easy. The passion and thrust for the completion of goal is the only strength which lead one to win.

Dreams and imagination gives way to let us know the wishes of the characters as well as fears. Imagination lets us peep into the psyche of the characters. Their perceptions and their minds are illustrated. Dunyazad's dream to be martyr and search for her sister is revealed through her vague dream: ‘all Dunyazad has to do is cross
waters that separate them.’ (72) Dunyazad asserts to move forward in her dreams as we observe that the two sisters ‘play instead of praying’ (53), and she floats towards the hunter making all believe presenting there that she could go beyond limits as far as her dreams concern: ‘They look and they know I will die for my dreams.’ (53)

Myths and legends are explored, recreated, and sometimes inverted to provide a fresh perspective to the society. Hariharan deals with the mythic story but at the same time we feel detachment from the sameness of the old myth. Kundu wrote well: 'Githa Hariharan's story reverberates with echoes from the text of the past and at the same time curves out daring lines of departure.' (62) (When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse.) Hariharan selected mythic stories to reveal the status of women in the modern context. Her women are recreated in distinct form in the atmosphere of myth and legend. Rama Kundu also states in When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse:

'Dunyazad encounters Dilshad, a slave-girl, and the two-tell stories to each other for seven nights and days. This is their way of re-enacting and reviving Shahrzad; at the same time this is the author's device to rewrite the legend in the post-modern context of feminism and metafiction. The author finds that the legend itself--both the story and the "Story woman" (25)-has a strange life of its own that goes on being re-created over and over again by posterity.' (65)

Hariharan uses myths to point out harsh and cruel face of patriarchal rules in society. Like The Thousand Faces of Night, myths are embedded in the novel. Many times she is ironical in her expressions revealing out unfair treatment of men towards women. Rama Kundu also notes in When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse, 'With pungent irony she exposes the sadism and cynicism behind the androcentric myth about harems: "All kings are collectors. These valuable items are women of all shape, colours and sizes" (90) Hariharan re-invents myth which influence and motivates the society to do certain things. Joana Filipa Da Silva says, 'By deconstructing stereotypical characters and plots in storytelling, Hariharan is
undoing the implicit morality and prejudice of traditional texts.' (102) Shahrzad, a saviour of all the women of her state, attains the status of a martyr. The stories are drawn from her own heart. This leads her to be called as ‘a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshted in different bodies, before her dreams let go of Dunyazad or her descendants.’ (25)

Mystery and suspense are prominent in the novel. The atmosphere in the novel is quite mysterious and filled with suspense. The chapter of ‘Knots in the Afterlife’ is depleted with mystery created by the novel. The city is ‘in the clutch of a dream’ (29) even at the time of noon. We come to know at last that the woman who travelled from Samarkand to Shahabad is Dunyazad. Until the end the mystery lies in the atmosphere and we are on the mercy of the novelist to get information and quench our curiosity about the woman. The only impression we receive from the presented scene is that the woman is in hurry to achieve some meaningful and significant for herself. Her hastiness shows it when she says ‘No. Move on. We must go there before the afternoon siesta is over.’ (32)

Hariharan uses the technique to hold her readers by concealing the information. The characters and their actions remain secret for a long time. When Dunyazad is revealed before us we are puzzled by many secrets like what had happened with Shahrzad and why Dunyazad travelled from Samarkand to Shahabad in a guise: ‘Now she (Dunyazad) is back in Shahabad, in the palace where her sister proved her mettle as a warrior. She is back though the battle is over. She is back, perhaps, because the battle is not over.’ (37) The readers are in doubt and can not anticipate what happens next. Dunyazad’s suspicion is woken by ‘Sabiha’s sudden silence and the accompanying look of shifty terror’ (40)

It is very mysterious in what circumstances Shahrzad is missing. It is very difficult to search her. Shahrzad comes to Shahabad secretly in a guise so that no one can know her secret mission: ‘Dunyazad sees the stirring of fear—a trembling half-formed thing, a spluttering flame.’ (40) The palace, the characters and the situations are mysterious in themselves as they are not clear and the certain part of information is hidden regarding them. Such is done in each story narrated in A River Sutra.
Dunyazad is confused with the mystery she is facing in Shahbad. She questions himself: 'Should she meet Shahryar so soon? Or should she familiarize herself with the palace again, its old and new secrets waiting to be discovered?' (42)

Hariharan's overall tone of writing may be considered as jovial-ironic with a little sadness due to sincerity of the themes she deals with. The language constantly refers that if her characters are in distress they find out their way of it as well. The remark of Rama Kundu (When Dreams Travel; Metafiction as Feminist Discourse) is noticeable here: 'It is worth noticing how Hariharan maintains the tone of joviality--a characteristic of much postmodern fiction--and tunes it to the ironic-parodic style that dominates the narration, though occasionally overpowered by a surging sadness.' (68)

The novel exhibits frequent change in narrators to make it more appealing and life-like. Mohua Ghosh in Feminist Interrogation of a Patriarchal Text: Intertextual Echoes and Departures also favours it saying, 'Githa Hariharan also goes on shifting and interchanging the roles of narrators and addressee, thus carving out amazing feats of departure from the source text.' (136)

The novel depicts apparent features of magical realism. M. H. Abrams states that the term 'magic realism' was applied to a school of surrealist German painters in the 1920s. Later it was used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and the works of Gabriel Marquez, Isabel Allende and Gunter Grass etc. He define the features of magic realism as 'an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales.' (200-01) The novel weaves the threads of magical realism in the novel. The stories told by the narrators in the novel illustrate magical realism. It foregrounds the feminist issues in the novel.

The fantastic and dream-like elements are merged with the acute suffering of women in the society. The stories follow the ever-shifting pattern in respect of time and place. The novelist creates magic through her well-knit stories told by Dunyazad and Shahrzad. The stories have unreal setting but it portrays the stark and ugly reality of the society. In the field of language, Hariharan adopted liberty in the sense that she
used many words in the language of the original source and provided their meaningful description at last so as to make it all easy. Biscaia also observed: 'Shahrzad's use of language is wholly successful in effecting the translation necessary to make it 'understandable'. (Biscaia, 135)

Thus, the whole novel is to make women conscious about their marginalized spaces by the society. Chitra Sankaran also states, '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.' (69) The theme and its handling have made the novel remarkable. W. S. Kottiswari also favours it saying, 'Writing of tradition and destabilizing it, turning it on its Head and installing an alternative has given a new freedom to her technique and style.' (97)

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Works Cited


